

Dean Koontz – The Crimson Witch

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[Easy read, easy print]

[Completely new scan]

THE MANBAT CHITTERED LOUDLY IN A SAVAGE WAR HOOP . . .

lifted itself with beating wings, raked its claws down Jake's cheeks.

The second manbat swept in and was upon him. He swiped feebly with his knife, but all his strength had left him. He could barely swallow the blood as fast as it poured into his mouth.

The manbats screamed wildly with knowledge of their success, then headed for his eyes . . .

THE
CRIMSON
WITCH
BY DEAN R. KOONTZ



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Prologue: THE CRIMSON WITCH

? She came spinning out of the thunderstorm, mad as all hell. Lightning flashed above her, rippled across the horizon like a great, semitransparent jellyfish, sink-ing liquidly into the horizon. The sky was a uniform gun-metal gray as if the clouds had been hammered into sheets and welded together from horizon to horizon by some industrious God of Melancholy. Thunder *boom-aboomed* like mountainous waves crashing against weathered rocks, each clap trailing off into the whisper of seafoam. *Boom! Ssshusscrack!* Her anger boiled as fiercely as the elements, lanced through her mind in awesome, painful flashes.

Her red robes fluttered behind her as she drifted through the night, swept in a halo like satin wings, filtered the lightning into the color of freshly spilled blood. She plunged into the dank, heavy clouds and came out in the spaces between, unruffled. Following the pulsations of the mammoth storm, she moved downward toward the small and fearful earth.

A black gull swooped toward her, oblivious of her approach, chortling to itself, dreaming of worms and insects, of things that squirmed and were good to eat. She puffed it into white smoke and gray ashes, zipped through the spot where it had been, moving down and down . . .

“Damn him!” she shouted to the thunder.

Her robes fluttered winglike.

“Damn him!” she roared again. And she did not mean the gull.

The storm echoed it back, madly clashing its cym-bals, insanely thumping its drums.

“Damn him to Hell!”

Echoes in other moments of the storm.

She could have damned him, too—literally. She could have sentenced him to a living Hell or death or a dozen different things in between. If he had been normal, like all Commoners, she could have lifted him up bodily with the twitch of a single finger, twirled him about without ever really touching him, and sent him plunging straight through the crust of the earth and into the bowels of eternal damnation—or at least into permanent juncture with solid rock. But he was not a Commoner. And in that lay the crux of the problem. All the twiddling of all her fingers could not stop him from doing what he had done to her, from taking her and using her as he wished. As she flew now, rain in her face, the fire in her loins told her it had not been entirely rape, not completely one-sided. After all, he was a handsome man . . . But no. No! Her magics had failed on him, and he had taken her. She must consider it rape. She must continue to roil hate through her mind, continue to build her animosity into formidable structures. He had used her!

And no one used Cheryn in any way. She was master of her mind and of her body. There was no one above her, no one to tell her what to do, how to do it, or when it should be done. She used others; others did not use her. It had always been like that! No one used Cheryn the Crimson Witch and got away with it.

Suddenly, she was below the clouds, flashing toward the earth. Rocks, trees, huts, and rivers flashed by below, colorless and nearly featureless in the storm gloom that sapped it of life and made all the world cower beneath its black splendor. Ahead lay the mountain with the red eye that stared blankly at the night, its pupil flickering now and again. She struck for it. Slowly angling in toward the shelf of earth and stone that protruded beneath the eye, she landed gently upon the soles of her tan, bare feet and rushed forward into her den.

The Death Screen hummed as she passed through it, recognized her, and closed its invisible mouth instead of biting. There had been a time, when she had first created the Death Screen, when the stones at the foot of the cliff had been littered with the flesh and bones of those who thought they might dare her invisible barrier to seek her lair and her soft and pliant form. Now, examples having been set in abundance, the stones were clean below, and her privacy was assured.

Inside, the polished black stone floor glittered brightly with the reflected tongues of the hearth fire. She could have devised regular lighting, for that was not a Lost Art, but there was something special about a fire, something that appealed to her more than the cold blue bulbs of quasi-fire. Now, even the hearth fire was unnecessary, for her eyes were aflame brightly enough to illuminate the darkest of caverns. Aflame with hatred. Well-nourished, carefully grown hatred,

“I’ll teach him!” She spat the words out to no one but herself. Beautiful, she remained strangely alone, seeking no companionship but the comfort of her own magics and the things they could do for her. Warm, she fought to be cold, and her reputation about the kingdom was one of dullness and aloofness, one of odd, solitary smugness. She paced the middle of the room, stood before a cauldron of bright green liquid that held her face in as much detail as a mirror of fine quality might. It was a fine face, a lovely face. The midnight hair tumbled around smooth, perfect skin, contrasted magnificently with her green-green eyes, framed her pert nose and her honey-dripping, bee-stung lips.

Her voice changed from fury to an electrified calm, from razor screech to a thing of humdrum and wind-moan. “As I am the Witch of Eye Mountain, the Crimson Witch, Cheryn the Daughter of Mulgai, thus I command you to clear, to show me the vision I seek.” She closed her gem eyes, strained her forehead.

The liquid began to bubble, forming froth that swam to the edges and clung to the iron cauldron like filings to a magnet. Then the bubbling grew less and less until the surface had once again become calm and smooth. But it no longer reflected her lovely face or the sleek curve of her sensuous neck, the pert upthrust of her breasts. Now it showed pictures . . .

She opened her eyes and stared at the vision.

Her face was gone . . .

Instead, there was a man and a dragon . . .

Chapter One: THE TREK BEGINS

? Jake reigned his mount, digging his feet hard against the beast's thick sides, and came to a halt, sway-ing as the beast swayed. He crossed his arms on the great horny ridge that was the front of his saddle and sat looking across the gorge. Steam snaked up from be-low where the Ice River splashed onto the Hell Boul-ders, *sissing*, dissipating itself in a furious explosion of white, condensing and continuing beyond as a new and purer stream, smaller in size, but warmer. Far away, across the crack in the land that some Common-ers called Devil's Grin and some called The Lips of Satan, stood the purple mountains like rotting teeth, dark, emerald forests ringing them like diseased gums. The mountains tempted, beckoned to him. He watched them as clouds, white and full, drifted among them, curling like fog fingers of some sentient mist creature. At the mountains, he would find that which he needed, that which he had come here for. He let his mind indulge in fantasies of success. Finally, his hind-quarters itching and sore, he slid from the gi-ant back of his mount, dropped the last ten feet to the ground, shook his wild mane of blond hair and de-lighted in the clatter of his walnut shell necklace that hung to his waist. Rounding the colossal leg, he said, "Yonder is Lelar."

"Lelar gives me the shivers," the dragon said, low-ering the huge head that topped its graceful neck. It stared across the gorge with him, clucking its tongue and sighing heavily.

Jake kept his gaze fixed on the mountains as his mind fiddled with the remnants of his wishes. "Why should anything scare *you*?"

The dragon, Kaliglia as he was named, snorted, clucked his giant pink tongue in his cheek again, mak-ing a sound vaguely like a shotgun blast muffled in a pillow. "There are stories."

"And that's all they are. Stories. Nothing more."

Kaliglia shook his head negatively, stirring a small breeze that played through Jake's hair. "Lelar is an evil kingdom. It has always been an evil kingdom, ruled by King Lelar since its founding more than six hundred years ago."

Jake snorted his disgust, pushed his hair back from his face, "Now, how could that be? Even in this coun-try, men don't live that long." He stretched, yawned. He sat on the ground, folded his brawny arms across his chest and drew up his knees. He still had thoughts of the witch, the red-robed wonder with the body of a goddess. He remembered her sleek legs, her hand-sized breasts and taut, chiseled nipples. He also remem-bered her weakly issuing curses and waving charms, wanting him as much as he wanted her but unwilling to admit it, to give in and enjoy. He wanted to laugh as the memory lodged in his mind and replayed itself over and over. He shook his head instead. Walnuts rat-tled. "The longest a man has ever lived, that I know of, was the Priest of Dorso. Kell mentioned he was 245 or so."

"I would not judge," Kaliglia said, misunderstand-ing the reason for the man's amusement, "until I had heard some of those stories for myself. You form opin-ions without any evidence. You are rash and undis-ciplined. And you seem to accuse me of foolishness."

"No. The Sorceress Kell told me you were a reli-able and noble beast when she gave you to me. I trust her. You aren't a superstitious fool—just a little mis-guided."

"Maybe. But you don't know the stories." There was an I'm-going-to-make-you-beg-to-hear-them-too tone in his rumbling. He bobbed his head up and down on the end of his slender neck as if agreeing with himself. He clucked his tongue again, wiped his lips with a hard, yellow tongue, clucked again.

Jake sighed, still staring at the mountains. "Well, tell me one, then."

Kaliglia settled down onto the massive pillars of his legs, knees bent, rolled slightly onto his side, shaking the earth and sending a dull booming reverberation through the nearby countryside. He sucked in

an enormous breath, exhaled slowly. “You are too bull-headed to really listen, I’m sure. Your biggest problem is an inability to admit your own narrow-mindedness. Or to admit you are wrong. But I’ll tell you anyway. Once, several years ago, a sailor came to the home of the Sorceress Kell. He was a weathered, beaten, half-starved hulk who had no mind left to him. Rather, his mind had been locked within itself, doubled and twisted and tied in so many knots that all his memories crisscrossed and short-circuited him into delirium. He did little but babble and drool. He could not even feed himself with any degree of success. He had to be attended to day and night, for if he were left to his own devices, it was quite probable that he would unwittingly bring about his own death, tumble over a cliff or some such. The Sorceress Kell had to open his mind, reach into it with her many and sundry powers and untie it so he could be whole again.

“Over the days that this required, she began to piece together a story so horrible as to make her seriously question its authenticity and yet so detailed as to demand that it be believed. There are some things a man can be made to believe are true by various conniving drugs and a clever drugsman. But the problem with drug-induced fantasies is that they have little verisimilitude, very little shaping detail. This story was too detailed, too finely drawn to be anything but genuine. In those days, Kell confided in me, coming out from her hut and sitting with me in the evening when the stars shone full and the sky was clear and endless. She told me his story in day-to-day installments. Thus, she unloaded some of her horror onto me, sharing the impossible burden of ugliness that the sailor had imparted to her with the spilling of his tale.

“It seems that this sailor, Golgoth, had signed aboard a sailing ship bound for the kingdom of Lelar from the kingdom of Salamanthe, that sheltered and exotic island nation that depends upon trade to maintain itself. It was not a matter of working in exchange for pay that induced Golgoth to enter as a ship’s hand on this particular cruise. No, the situation had darker roots than that. He had been in a fight in a dockside pub and had killed a man. The only way he could avoid the death penalty was to sign on for ten years in the service of a merchant marine vessel. It was a good opportunity, considering his other choices. It meant a place to sleep, a hope for the future, and the means of a steady and lucrative income. He leaped at the chance to be free, vowed never to take another drink and thus stir his killing rage, pitched into his sailor’s duties with much vigor, and secretly made plans for escape in Lelar.

“The journey began as a good one, blessed with stormless skies and sound wind.” Kaliglia paused, held out his tongue to collect the rain water that was now falling lightly. After a moment, he continued: “But when they reached Lelar, things immediately began to darken.”

“It’s beginning to sound like a wives’ tale.” Jake held out his own tongue for a wetting.

Kaliglia grumbled good-naturedly. “I would bite off your head if I were not so amiable.”

“You’d get indigestion, old son.”

The dragon weaved his head agitatedly, sighed, sucked air, sighed again, but continued. “The first night in dock, the first mate got drunk and knifed the captain over some petty argument about black-marketing a crate of fruit.”

“What’s so supernatural about that? Drunken brawls and petty theft are common among seamen—as Golgoth bears testimony to.”

The rain fell harder.

“Then,” Kaliglia said, pausing dramatically, “rats infested the supplies.”

“So?”

“Don’t you see?” the dragon snorted. “Murder and rats. Murder and rats. What more could you wish to see to prove that something wicked and debased is bound to happen?”

“There are always rats around docks, and they are always infesting ships and supplies and cargoes.”

“Okay,” the dragon rumbled. “Then I will get on with Golgoth’s story and see if you think *that’s* normal!”

“Please do.”

Both took another tongue wetting, sucking at the rain, before Kaliglia continued with Golgoth’s tale.

“Golgoth, as I said, planned to escape from the ship and set up life in Lelar. His superiors—the second mate was made captain by a vote of the crew—were not as aware of his status as were the

original captain and the first mate (who was now confined to the brig and ordered to live on bread and water until their return to Salamanthe, where he could be given a fair trial and summarily executed for murder). The watch that had been kept over Golgoth was neglected by the new officers, and the criminal found his escape much easier than he had anticipated. On the third day of their docking—rather, on the third night—while the ship waited only to lay in new provisions and cleanse the craft of vermin, he slipped out of the common quarters and onto the deck. He snapped a hand into the neck of the lone watchman, and disappeared over the railing without so much as a whimper of protest or notice from anyone. He was again a free man. But not for very long.

“Seems he drank too much in a dockside grog house and entered into roulette with the house as his opponent. The game, apparently somewhat less than honest, had soon drained his pockets of all that jingled and all that crackled when folded. He found himself out in the streets, staggering about with no coin either to quench his thirst and belay the onrushing headache that pounded dully at the rear of his brain or to rent a bed in a one-night rooming house. He lurked about the docks, forcing his befuddled mind to come to grasps with some plan of action to rescue him from what could prove to be very dire circumstances indeed. Finally, he tried beating a smaller sailor with the idea of making off with his money. But the smaller sailor happened to be a foot-fighting expert of some renown in the area. Ten minutes later, Golgoth was sitting in a jail cell, three of his teeth missing, and a bruise splotching one entire cheek and half his chin. He moaned about his misfortune for a time until cell-mates threatened to bruise more of him than his miserable face. Then he began examining the circumstances from an optimistic point of view, deciding that—no matter what else might happen—he had a bed and a meal coming. He settled down to sleep, the liquor temporarily mollifying the pain in his mouth. Yes, he reasoned, he was well-off. If the new officers realized he was a convict doing time on the ship, they would certainly not extend their search to the jail. That would be the last place they would look. When he got out, they would be gone, and it would be safe to walk the streets of the capital. And when he was released, he would not be so foolish as to pick a male victim no matter what his size.

“But Golgoth was planning uselessly. It was not to be that simple. In the blackest part of the night, some hours before dawn, guards liveried as under the House of Lelar came into the jail and collected the four prisoners in custody there. They were chained together and led away, all of their protests and questions answered only by the slam of club to groin. They soon learned their lessons and grew moodily silent, not daring even to talk among themselves. They were marched through the streets to the castle of King Lelar where they were put into private rooms, the doors locked behind them.

“These rooms were sumptuously decorated. The walls were covered with brilliant crimson velvet. The floor was a swirl of golden-threaded marble. Later, servants delivered the best of foods and large quantities of it. Golgoth was served wine that had been processed from the best vineyards of the kingdom, dark and light stuff as sweet as honey, as smooth as water. Even a whore was brought to him, a wondrous woman with enormous breasts, and he was encouraged to indulge himself to his full extent. Being some time without a woman, Golgoth indulged in the whore several times before dawn. Only then did the nature of this treatment begin to have its effect upon him. He grew weary and fell into heavy sleep. And when he awoke, there was fear in him like a cold stone in his stomach. He had come to realize, whether through his dreams or his waking thoughts or an amalgam of both, that the treatment he was receiving was much the same treatment a condemned man might expect on the evening before his execution.”

Jake coughed, watched the lightning flash as the storm passed on to the west and the rain began to slow in its fall. “No trappings, please. Just the bare story.”

Lightning flashed dully.

Thunder boomed like baby giants laughing.

The rain was cold and good.

Kaliglia snorted but went on: “Golgoth was brought before King Lelar that same morning, though the meeting had none of the airs of a royal audience. Golgoth was brought into the royal chamber by three guards who held him at sword point as if he might turn and scamper if they dropped their attention for an instant. Lelar sat in the background with several white-robed officials, much as an observer. Golgoth

was tied firmly to two thick ropes, one on each ankle. When he asked what was to happen, he was clouted and told to remain quiet in the presence of Lelar. Then, with little ceremony and no warning, too fast for the poor man to get his wits about him, he was thrust into a circular blue aperture in the wall beside the king's throne."

"Thrust into the wall?"

"Yes."

"Is this the portal to my own world that Kell has told me about?"

"Yes again."

"Go on."

"Inside the wall, Golgoth was weightless. He seemed not to amount to a single gram as he floated about in the gloom there. And that is just what it was. Impenetrable gloom. Only one spot of light shone, the portal through which he had been shoved. Beyond this, King Lelar and his advisers stood hunched together, peering in at him. Then, just as he was getting a hold on his fear, great gusts of wind clutched at him almost with the sensitivity of fingers, bending around him, molding to him, spinning him away in the gloom. The portal dimmed to a mere spot of light, a pinprick, fainter, fainter, fainter. The rope unraveled and unraveled, his only hold on the real world.

Kaliglia paused to catch his breath.

"And?"

"And then came the smoke ghosts."

The harshest part of the storm was gone now, blasting between the towering peaks of the Twin Towers, its black trail still darkening the sky, the faint tint of the setting sun tracing gold behind it.

"Smoke ghosts?" Jake asked.

"That's what Golgoth called them. They were creatures composed of smoke. They were bilious and unreal, yet they maintained some mockery of form. They were mists, yet he could feel their hands upon him, more solidly than the eerie hands of the winds, ice hands that drove needles of cold sleep through him, deep into him.

Jake shivered a chilly ache that was not altogether new. The only other times he had felt it were burned brilliantly into his memory. The first time had been when they had buried his mother. They had taken her to the cemetery in the oblong box and had left her there beneath the earth, left her alone. They had come back to the skeleton house, come back to the rooms like hollowed out ice cubes where her presence had held the fire that burned no longer. He had been taken up the long set of winding stairs to the bathroom. They had cajoled him into showering—his aunts had—and had shoe-horned him into his pajamas. But on the way to the bedroom, he had stepped on something cold. He had looked down, and he had seen one of his mother's hair pins still twined through with a strand of blond hair. A shiver ran through him then, flooded into a scream that lasted an hour until the doctor could get there and give him a sedative. That first time, that first cold ache was a knife plunge through his bone marrow, a thing he would always remember. The second time had been when he had stepped through the dimensions and found himself in this world—and had realized that the old world was behind him and he had exchanged realities. That time, he had just barely choked a scream. "And what did they do with Golgoth?" he asked Kaliglia.

The dragon rumbled. His voice cracked. He sniffed and began again. "He felt the smoke ghosts touching him, humming ghostly moans as if they wanted to tell him things. He lost consciousness then, screaming, just as he felt the ropes being retracted. He remembers nothing else until the Sorceress Kell opened his mind and freed him of his horror."

They sat in silence for a moment.

"Well?" Kaliglia asked, wiping a tongue across his thick, black lips and binking his enormous eyelids down over his blue and green eyes.

"Well what?"

"Now do you believe Lelar is an evil kingdom?"

"Perhaps."

"Then we won't be going there?"

“Oh, yes, but we will.” Jake stood and stretched.

“But with the smoke ghosts and—”

“I *have* to go there. It is there that the portal to my own time line exists. Without it, I must remain here forever.” He walked to the beast's side, pulled him-self up the great back, climbed into the natural horn saddle. “Let's get up to that rock bridge and camp there tonight. Tomorrow morning we cross into Lelar.”

Kaliglia turned his truck cab head around, looking over his shoulder, snorted with disgust. He lumbered to his feet and crashed off along the gorge in search of the natural bridge . . .

Chapter Two: THE CRIMSON WITCH

? She bent over the cauldron, her hands clutching at the iron rim, squinting her eyes so that her eyebrows almost met, and concentrating as hard as she possibly could, concentrating until her head swam a little and her blood pounded dizzily in her temples. The liquid in the pot was hazing, eddying with ebony and ocher, streaked through with gamboge and silver, damp-ing out the picture of the man and the dragon that she had been watching so intently. Too intently. She had become so absorbed in the picture that she had neglected to hold it on the surface of the liquid. Now it was slipping away from her, lost in the swirlings of colors. She doubled her force on it, set it to bubbling again. The silver formed bubbles that burst and splashed back as ebony onto the gamboge surface, swirling into cream and ocher and amber . . . Once more, froth collected at the edges of the pot and boiled there until she eased back some of the pressure of her magics. Then the liquid cooled again, smoothed into a mirror that reflected her face, the perfect green-ness of her eyes, the perfect upward tilt of her haughty little nose. She snorted, stamped her foot, released control of the liquid.

The hearth fire flickered.

Outside, the storm had reached the mountain and was surging against the peak, caught in the down-drafts that were turning it backwards onto the valley once more.

Lightning flashed.

Thunder erupted, boomed, crashed backwards, echoed into quiet, only to erupt again, pounding, stomping across the sky.

She exerted herself again, turned on her magics. The liquid cleared once more and presented a picture of a man riding a dragon alongside a deep gorge toward a natural bridge that would eventually carry them across the river and into Lelar. The man clung to the great horny ridge of the saddle, fighting to stay on during the bumpiest moments of the ride, leaning against it and relaxing when the way grew smooth. He was truly a handsome man with a magnificent mane. She wondered what thing could draw him from the peace on this side of the gorge to the horror and evil that lurked in Lelar.

Then she remembered to get mad at him again. "Damn it!" she snapped, stamping her foot hard on the floor again. She kicked the kettle and screamed almost at once, dancing around and trying to grab hold of her injured toe. When she got hold of herself, she reached into the toe with her magics and set every-thing straight again. It stopped hurting.

She turned back to the cauldron, called the picture back again, and concentrated on hating him. He had used her! She mumbled the words of the proper chant. She mumbled them forwards, then backwards. She blinked her eyes thrice, twitched her nose to the left once and to the right twice. Then she concentrated . . .

But he remained seated on the dragon, cocksure as when she had begun the chant, as undamaged as he had been before she had muttered a single word. She had cursed him to fall into the ravine, fall into the steam to a fiery death on the hot boulders below. But there he sat. Cocksure. Damn him! She spat into the liquid and tried again. This time, she tried to ash him, to burn him with searing fire of the sun, to crumple him into dry, gray useless dust. But that didn't work either. He leaned against the horny hump of the dragon's back, oblivious to her efforts, unaware that she was using her powerful magics on him.

She let the picture cloud, turned away from the cauldron.

Wasn't she Cheryn the Daughter of Mulgai?

And wasn't she the Witch of Eye Mountain?

"And aren't I the Crimson Witch, feared by all the Commoners?" she asked the walls of the room,

the tapestries that covered the dirt and rock beneath.

But the walls did not answer.

“Well, aren't I?”

Still—silence.

In anger, she struck life into two rocks and repeated to them the question that the walls had chosen not to answer. The rocks quickly agreed that she was, in-deed, all of these things that she claimed to be: Cheryn the Daughter of Mulgai (and, yes, Mulgai had been the greatest Witch of Eye Mountain that any Commoner had ever shuddered beneath, though she was a gentle woman and kindly disposed to the Untalented as well as the Talented), the Witch of Eye Mountain, and the Crimson Witch (as some of the more romantic Commoners had taken to calling her chiefly because of her red robes that she always wore). A sight: dark-ness all about except for the shimmering cinnabar form of the shapely witch cruising between the mountain peaks, sliding along the air stream into the eye that was a cave. Yes, a sight to stir the heart of many a Common Untalented boy, though he never might taste of her breasts, never might know the pleasure of her thighs.

She struck the rocks dumb as they requested, life being too much of a burden for creatures accustomed to the inactivity of inorganic existence.

She turned to the storm that had pushed back into the valley in an effort to run the mountains at the far end where it had failed to run these. Questioning it like an inquisitor, she threatened to torture its nonsensical soul if it did not respond.

Thunder cracked.

Lightning exploded in fireworks of yellow and white.

The night reacted to her whims.

The air was electrified.

She crossed to the rough-hewn entrance and passed through the Death Screen, feeling its hundreds of test-ing prickles as it determined her nature and name. She stood on the lip of rock outside, watching the thunderstorm boom about her, watching the storm clouds swarm around her, dipping their dark bellies against the peaks of the lower mountains. She raised her hands, clapped them thrice. Three cannon volleys of thunder answered her summons, booming about in the stone, moaning and echoing, threatening to shatter the lesser stones with their voices. She winked her eyes, and another flash of lightning leaped up and down the dark sky, lighting the world from horizon to horizon.

There was but one course of action to follow now that her Talents had failed, now that her magics had been tried and found wanting. She would follow them, keeping always out of sight, always in the background until the perfect opportunity presented itself. She would wait until they were teetering on the brink of some impossible chasm, and she would send a great wind to blow upon their flank and toss them over. Or she would wait until a snake lay in their path, and she would lift it with the invisible fingers of her magics and toss it upon them so that it might bite the bastards with its death-cored fangs.

Lightning . . .

Thunder . . .

A gull screeched, coming in toward its nesting place in the cliffs.

She lifted a finger.

She burned it out of the sky.

She lifted from the ledge and floated into the darkening storm. The winds rose and fell about her, fluted her red robes and sent them shimmering with brilliant pulsations of crimson and rouge and red the color of blood . . . Rain lashed her but did not leave her wet. It stung her cheeks but did not leave a blush. Once, lightning struck full upon her, but she was neither burned nor shocked. She lifted arms to the storm and held it against her finely formed breasts, suckling its fury on her marble nipples. She moved on, in pursuit of the man named Jake and the dragon called Kaliglia, waiting for the perfect opportunity .

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Chapter Three: THE RITUAL OF PASSING

? Jake leaned against the saddle of the dragon's shoulders and watched the ravine slide by them, steam hissing up like great ghost snakes, the roar of water-to-steam, steam-to-water dying behind them. The mam-moth beast was only lumbering at what was, for it, an easy pace (being none too anxious to pass into the kingdom of Lelar where its stories would no longer be stories but fragments of a reality). Even so, they were moving, because of the monster's stride, faster than a stout and healthy man could run. As darkness drifted upon the land, what little light there was now screened by the thick storm clouds, the bridge lay only a half an hour ahead. They could reach it easily enough tonight and move tomorrow into the evil kingdom with the six-hundred-year-old-potentate watching over them.

He shook his head, listened to his walnut shell neck-lace rattle. He needed that sound, that familiar clack-ing that was a touch with reality. None of this seemed real. The Sorceress Kell popped into his mind; he could see her dressed in burlap and cotton, a gypsy band about her head to hold her gray hair out of her eyes. She did not seem real. She was more like some-thing dredged out of a childhood fairy tale. Then Kell was gone, followed by an image of the dragon he now rode. A talking dragon. An intelligent dragon. His slim hold on reality was broken altogether. Surely a talking dragon had been something he had seen on television, something in a cartoon one Saturday morn-ing that now stuck with him and showed up here in his fantasy. Then the dragon was gone, too, replaced now by the crimson-robed witch, the girl he had borne to the ground back there. She was like something in an erotic novel. Her legs were lovely, perhaps the best-shaped legs he had ever seen. Her belly was flat, unadorned by an ounce of fat, as solid as the stomach of a young boy. Her breasts were very womanly, however, handfuls of soft, resilient flesh that trem-bled like jelly in his hands but looked like finely carved marble to his eyes. And her face . . . Cherub's face . . . Yes, it was all too pat. Most likely, he had been in an accident on his scooter and was now suffering a brain concussion, strapped into some hospital bed somewhere with anxious friends crowded around waiting for signs of life . . .

No. No use deluding himself. It wasn't like that at all. There had been no accident. He was alive, well, conscious. He could remember very clearly how he had gotten here. He could remember who he had been and what had happened that night before he had run into the Sorceress Kell.

The jogging of the dragon's step was hypnotic, threading his mind back through itself, bringing him memories of that other world, that other rime line, that last night before he had left his world and stepped into this one . . .

He was Jake Turnet, twenty-one years of age, a child now grown to be a man.

He was the son of Arnold Turnet, the founder and developer of Turnet Munitions, Incorporated.

And he was a drop-out.

His father had shepherded him successfully through high school. His father had chosen his curriculum for him, had chosen his activities, had chosen his friends. His father, indeed, had even decided what girls were social equals, establishing a list of those Jake Turnet could date and those he could not. His father had corralled him into thinking that, more than anything else, he wanted to pick up the reins of the family in-dustry, that he wanted to supervise the making of bombs and bullets and napalm and mustard gas. His dreams were of death, and his conversation was one of kill ratios and death statistics.

His father took him often to look down upon the main plant from their private helicopter. They would soar high, taking in the entire complex. It covered well over two hundred acres and employed some four thousand hustling souls. "This will all be yours one day," his father would say. And he would look and nod and smile.

But down inside somewhere, buried beneath his cal-loused emotions, there was a part of him that was not smiling—that could not smile. There was a part of him that screamed out that he *wouldn't* take over Tur-net Munitions, Incorporated, would never be a part of it. But he studiously repressed that voice, thinking it the common reactionary force that all young men harbor against their parents. He argued with himself that he was lucky, lucky to be coming into all of this. Money, power, importance, security. It was all his, all his when he wanted to take it, all his when he was ready to lift the reins from his father's hands. Lucky . . .

And then Arnold Turnet had died. Ironic, really. A napalm storage tank had exploded, showering the administration building and doing away with Arnold Turnet in much the same fashion it would have zeal-ously done away with an ignorant yellow-skinned Ori-ental had it not exploded prematurely and had it been sent, as intended, to war.

With Arnold Turnet's death came something else, something very good: Jake Turnet's freedom.

That part of him that had been yelling out without using words, that little voice that he had been repress-ing would suddenly not be repressed any longer. It bubbled out of his core, throbbed from his soul and took control of him, making him realize that it had not been a minority portion of his soul, but a majority and that he had been repressing the wrong feelings to please his father. The voice whispered his future to him, turning him on—and turning him off to the scene his father had so painstakingly painted for him.

He did not pick up the slack reins of Turnet Muni-tions, Being twenty-one and of legal age, he had every right to do just that, but other desires, other dreams swelled in his mind. He set up three trust funds: one half of the profits were to go to rehabilitating war vic-tims—on both sides—and to establishing homes for orphans of war; another fourth was set up in his name and produced a regular allowance for him; the final fourth was put back into the company. He was not being hypocritical, he reasoned. If he closed Turnet Munitions, someone else would produce the same weapons and use the profits to better themselves. This way, at least, some of the ill-gotten money was being returned into an effort to improve the lot of those that the war deprived of the simple things. Those who were deprived of their lives could not be atoned for, and he did not try. War was the game of Mankind, not the game of his family. He felt little, if any, anguish. Next, he placed all of the affairs of Turnet Munitions into the pudgy hands of Wilson Abrams, the chief attorney of the firm, doubling the man's salary to an incredible figure that had caused Mrs. Abrams to pass out—before she went on an unrestrained shopping spree in an effort to see if she could wipe out at least some of the raise. Then, with business affairs com-pletely relegated to other, more capable men, he quit his business administration courses at Princeton and transferred to a much smaller college where he could come to know the people as people and not just as faces or numbers. He took up the study of English Lit-erature and settled down to his new role as hippie drop-out artist. He wrote some poetry.

And he met some people.

Some strange people.

There was Leona the Nymph, a silver-haired wraith who had a great deal of trouble keeping her clothes on or her desires in chains, but a person with great under-standing and a heart warmer than that of any stereo-type Hollywood mammie the world had ever seen. She wanted her fun, and she might be a bit pushy in getting it, but she also assumed the burdens of her lovers, took on their problems and carried them for them so that her lovers received more than pleasure for pleasure given—they received a confidant, an ally against the rest of the world for as long as they wanted her.

There was John the Avenger, the Negro football star who maintained himself on scholarship and allow-ance. He was torn between being the black militant he knew he should be and accepting the money for playing and winning games for a white team and a white school. It was the oldest dilemma of all— whether or not to sacrifice his personal well-being for a cause, a cause that very well might never notice his presence or his sacrifices anyway.

And there was Jennie of the Dark Hair, John's girl, a liberal thinker, usually wrapped up in some new phil-osophy, but fun to be with and pretty to watch.

The three of them helped to introduce him to PBT, the drug that didn't expand the mind, but which

turned the mind in upon itself so that one might explore inner vistas and roadways of self-discovery.

And there had been that night . . .

He had received his weekly allowance check in the mail—two hundred and eighty-five dollars. He had proceeded immediately to the bank where he had converted the slip of paper into many slips of paper with more immediate value. And he had set out with seventy-five of it to purchase thirty red caps of PBT from the furtive, dark-haired, dark-eyed little man who sold the stuff from a corner table in the Cariolis Bar and Grill on the edge of town. They had gone through the usual set of signals for a purchase. Jake had entered and bought a drink first, standing with it at the bar. Finally, after the proper amount of time, he had crossed the crowded establishment and had drawn up a chair at the dark man's table, saying, "Anyone sitting here?"

"No," the little man said.

"It's a bad scene when you haven't any friends," Jake had said, following the established ritual.

"I guess so."

"You have friends?"

"I do."

"But you seem to be alone."

"My friends are in my pockets."

That was the key line. There was only one more to go, and that one was his again: "Can I take a few of your friends home with me?"

And then the dealing began. The little man always asked seventy-five cents more than the going price per cap, and it had become part of the tradition that the buyer had to bargain down to two dollars and fifty cents before he would sell anything. This might partially have been because the dark man was masochistic enough to enjoy being forced to sell lower than he wanted, but it was also and chiefly a safeguard. A narcotics agent might learn the passwords well enough to fake a potential buyer, but it was doubtful he would understand the necessity for bargaining that the dark man demanded. The narcotics agent would offer, in his haste, to purchase the caps at the stated three and a quarter. Then the dark man, realizing he did not have a hip but a square on his hands, would innocently contend that he had no idea what the agent was talking about.

Jake followed the ritual and bought thirty of the capsules, the largest purchase he had ever made.

"You have friends you're buying for?" the dark man wondered.

He nodded, took the capsules, handed over the money, and left the bar, heading for John the Avenger's apartment.

John, Leona, and Jennie were waiting for him.

He spread the red caps out on the Persian rug that covered the beaten floor, running his fingers through them as Midas might run his fingers through new gold. They sat yoga fashion on the floor, ringing the gleaming pile of caps.

"You going to send up the whole student body?" John the Avenger asked.

Then he briefly stated his plan. The highest he had ever heard that anyone had gone was six caps. He planned to go up on twenty.

"Twenty," John the Avenger had whispered.

"Twenty."

"Man, that could be suicide."

"Nah, I'll pass out first."

"You don't know."

"Twenty," he had said, suddenly growing stubborn.

Suicide or not, he would try it. His father had kept him chained through his childhood, had forced adulthood on him long before it was due. Now that he had gained his freedom at last, much of the boyish behavior that had previously been denied release was surging to the surface to taint matters of the utmost seriousness. He would take all twenty, despite the danger, just as a young boy might accept the challenge to eat poison ivy.

First, however, they shared. John and Leona and Jennie each popped two caps. Jake took four.

They sat cross-legged, staring at one another, swooning as the acid pulled them into interior mindways and opened vistas into their own Ids where they acted out their most depraved fantasies, into their superegos where they acted out their most idealistic dreams. Le-on was already unbuttoning her blouse, freeing her-self from the encumbering clothes, struggling with the zipper on her jeans. John and Jennie clung to each other, swaying . . .

And Jake set about taking the rest of the cap-sules . . .

He went deeper . . .

Felt the tugging and pulling of the minute things of the world, the rides of the air . . .

Down . . .

In . . .

The grain in the wooden floor throbbed about him like a river, coursing at the edges of the Persian rug, burbling, splashing, rushing madly around and around the island of patterns. Then the weave of the carpet itself was sweeping up at him, swallowing him, chew-ing at him with teeth that were really pictures of men and horses and elephants and palaces and magic car-pets. Leona had stretched out naked upon the rug and was writhing out her own fantasies. Her body became a tossing ship, her breasts the mast platforms, her fly-ing hair the sails whipped by the wind . . .

He popped two more capsules.

Two more . . .

Three more . . .

Two more . . .

Visions exploded around him.

He was a pit at the center of a fruit.

The pit erupted in flames . . .

In time, the visions faded and he reached a place of great tranquility. Suddenly the tossing of the carpet and the surging of the grain in the floorboards ceased. The others sat about, wrapped in their own arms and lost in the alleyways of their own Ids and egos, their own desires and their private dreams. Yet there was nothing for him, no dreams of orgies, no dreams of great heroism. Just tranquility. It was as if he had passed through the wall of a mighty storm and had now reached the other side where tranquility was as perfect as it had been before he had taken the first red cap. So was this all that a massive dose of PBT would do? No . . . No . . . No, he had *not* passed through the wall of the storm . . . He had only reached the eye of the hurricane. Again, things began to hap-pen . . .

To the left where the walls joined in the corner of the room, the walls no longer joined. There was an immense crack running from ceiling to floor, a crack that widened even as he watched until there was a four-foot gap between the partitions. Still the roof did not sag and the floor did not give way. And, be-yond, there was not a scene of the city as he might have expected there would be. Instead, there was a field of rich green grass backed by mountains tall and purple, the mountains ringed with dark forests. And grazing in this field were . . .

He blinked his eyes.

The crack and the field remained . . .

He stood, swaying, and approached the crack in the wall, staring through. Unicorns were grazing in the field. No . . . No, not exactly unicorns either. These were more like one-horned cows than one-horned horses. They were bulkier than horses, bulkier —certainly—than any unicorn, though they were still more slender and graceful than cows. They turned from their munching to study him. Suddenly one of them started and took flight. The others followed it mindlessly. Yes, they could run much faster and much more gracefully than cows. They loped, their broad shoulders plunging them on, on, on toward the trees and the mountains. When they had receded into dots again and, apparently, could not see him, they stopped and resumed their grazing.

He turned from the scene beyond and examined the crack in the wall. The edges were perfectly smooth. It was not really a crack so much as a slice taken out of the corner of the room, as if some giant had slit the walls and carried off the corner. He reached a hand through and stuck it into the daylight and air of the field. It did not wither or change color. He wiggled the fingers. They acted accordingly.

Behind, Leona called to him.

He started to turn, stumbled, and clutched out at the walls to support him. But there were no walls. He fell backwards into the field. He looked back at the door-like aperture through which he had come. He could see Leona standing naked in the room, looking per-plexed—and beautiful. Then the door was gone . . .

He stood and examined the air where the portal had been, waving his arms back and forth, hoping to encounter some invisible obstacle. There was none. The door was lost to him.

How long would it be until he woke from the PBT dreams—for this was surely a dream?

He felt very weary. Did that mean the dream would soon end and he would find himself back in the room with the others? He stretched out on the cool, green grass and fell swiftly into sleep . . .

Sleeping in a dream?

He was wakened by a woman's hands on his forehead. She was dressed in cotton and burlap with a gypsy hairband holding back her gray hair to keep it out of her eyes. The Sorceress Kell . . .

And as the days wore on, the realization came that the crack had been more than a simple delusion. With the overdose of PBT, he had somehow opened a psy-chic doorway between the dimension? time lines? probabilities?—and was now a long, long way from home in a land where the Great Fire was well-re-membered, in a land where the nuclear holocaust had happened a century or so earlier and where life had changed in its aftermath , . .

Chapter Four: THE CRIMSON WITCH

She settled through the last wisps of the storm's hair, the breezes fluffing her red robes behind her in the darkness, tickling her pretty face and dancing across the sleekness of her body. She stirred the air with her passage, making the thunder to go mute and the lightning to lose its ferocity so that they would not alert her prey to her coming. She alighted in a small copse to the left of the spot where the man and the dragon lay sleeping, head to head, the man with his feet braced against an outcropping of stone. Drop-ping to her hands and knees, she wound her way through the brush until she had reached a point from which she could watch her prey unobserved. They both were sleeping soundly only fifty feet from the lip of the gorge.

The man's face was turned toward her, and she could not help but marvel at the blond mane and the way it fell so much like the mane of a wild animal, the way it framed his square, handsome face, his thin and cruel, yet somehow beautiful lips.

She shook herself back into hatred, casting out the sentimentality.

He had used her!

She shifted her weight from one knee to the other, squinted her eyes, and mumbled the proper phrases to enact her Talents and get her magics into opera-don. She could not affect him directly, for she had tried and failed. Though he was not a Talented, he was somehow immune to her Talents. But perhaps she could stir the elements and affect him indirectly . . .

She reached out and grasped the air with her Tal-ents, toying with it, getting the feel of it, letting it run through her mental fingers and wet her mental palms. The air washed her. She lifted her real arms and hands to it in supplication and in demand. It threaded her fin-gers and wrapped into eddying pools in the cups of her hands.

The wind babbled to her.

The wind obeyed her.

She caused the air to grow heavy above her head, to pile and pile on dark layer after dark layer, to com-press into the small volume of space. Then, gently nudging it with her magics, she began to shuffle the layers, mixing and shuffling, making the wind ever stronger. Still, she contained it. She used some more of her magics to build a shield about it so that it could go nowhere, so that the pressure it was building was contained. The pools of air howled above her head, rubbing against one another, and she was forced to shush them lest they awaken her prey. When the pressure had reached a safety maximum and would any moment leap out of control and swallow her like the explosion of a bomb, she directed it at the man that slept only fifty feet from the brink of death.

The wind screamed again, whipping away from her and scittering across the ground toward the supine form.

Jake woke to the howling and started to raise his head.

The wind hit him then, jerking him upright and off his feet. It swirled about him, raising a dust cloud that all but obscured him from her view. It lifted him off the ground and twirled him higher, higher still until he was twenty feet above the ground.

She stood and came from the cover of the copse, laughing. Her dark hair flew about her head as her robes slipped tightly around her shapely body, clung to her, molded to her. Her green eyes flashed beliger-ance and triumph. "I couldn't touch you!" she shouted above the howling. "But the wind I made will carry you away."

He looked about, searching the darkness in hopes of catching sight of her.

With another part of her mind, she lit the area around them like daylight so that he could watch her in his last moments, could see that it was truly she who gained revenge.

The dragon stirred and lumbered to its feet. It moaned in panic and stumbled back and forth a moment before finally deciding to stay still and wait out the horror.

“Let me down!” Jake bellowed, his hair wild and teased.

“Like you let me go when you had me where you wanted me?”

“Oh, for crissakes!”

“What?”

He spun about, whirling and tumbling as she maintained the shuffling of the layers of air, continually building the pressure needed to hold his hundred and eighty pounds.

“What did you say?” she asked, thinking the strange word might be a charm to undo her magics.

“That was a deity of my world,” he snapped. “Now let me down!”

“Like for like!” She forced a laugh.

“Like hell! You enjoyed what I did to you back there.”

The light she had created dimmed as if in a blush. “I did not!”

“You cooperated.”

“You might have—killed me.”

“And why do you wear the kind of clothes you wear?” he asked, tumbling.

The dragon turned its head from one to the other as if watching a tennis match.

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“That dress.”

He tumbled, fell, bobbed in the wind, circling twenty, now twenty-five feet over her head.

“What about this dress?” she called.

“You must wear it just to tease the local Common boys.”

“Why, you—”

She stamped her foot.

“Vee necks show off your figure well, my dear, but they aren't modest, and there is absolutely no sense in trying to pretend they are.”

She put her hands to the neckline of her robe, drawing the halves together over her ripe breasts. She stamped her foot again.

“And those slits up the side—” he continued.

She pulled her shapely leg back into the concealing folds of the robe and dropped her hands to hold the slits shut. But the vee neck opened again, revealing the soft halves of her moonlike breasts, smooth and lovely in the artificial psi-light.

“You wanted me to do what I did,” he said again.

She grabbed the wind with her mind, reached her arms out to it. She stirred it into greater fury. She spat into the wind, and the wind carried her spittle and splattered it over Jake's cheek. He cursed her. She made the winds shriek and howl. She made the winds lift him and carry him close to the edge of the ravine. Stacking and shuffling the layers like cards, she pushed him beyond the brink, left him dangling over nothingness . . .

“Now,” she said, “I will diminish the winds.”

But at that moment, the dragon moved out of its obscurity and craned its neck over the edge of the gorge, swung it directly in front of Jake. Jake grabbed hold of that thick, long trunk and held on as the wind was cut from under him. The dragon swung its head around, bringing him back onto solid ground once more.

She reached quickly into the air and began stacking layers of it over her head in hopes of creating a second wind that would carry her prey away far more speed-ily, long before the cunning dragon could think to res-cue him.

But he was running for her.

She backed away, stacking the wind.

But he was coming too fast . . .

She would have to leave and come back later to mount her second offensive.

She lifted into the air.

He clutched at her bare feet! Held her! Pulled her down . . .

She struggled, lacking and hitting and clawing since her magics were no good against him. But he held on, taking her punishment and slowly exerting more and more force to tame her. He was such a powerful man, his arms like cords of wood, his muscles like knotted lengths of steel. He pulled her onto the ground with him, dragging her across his lap. Lifting her robes to bare her smooth, lovely rump, he began spanking her.

“Stop it!” she shouted

He spanked her again.

She caused lightning to strike the peak of his burly head, but her powers were useless against him. The bolt dissipated into brilliant sparks and did not harm him.

He slapped her harder, stinging her with his heavy palm.

She caused a shower of sharp-toothed rodents to descend upon him, but the rodents fled and did not attempt to gnaw his flesh.

She brought heavy rains, but he did not get wet.

She brought hail.

He was not bruised.

He spanked her harder, harder still.

She began to cry.

“Who gave you your immunity?” she howled.

“The Sorceress Kell, a stronger Talented than you.” He grinned, slapping her behind again.

She caused boulders to drop upon his head.

The boulders turned to dust and blew away.

“That old bitch!” she moaned of Kell.

“She is a good woman, a good sorceress,” he corrected her, slapping her reddened flesh even harder. “She is wise and all-knowing, not just a temperamental, Talented little snot!”

Finally she realized that fighting only brought on more spanking. She went limp and did not try to harm him either with her magics or her feet and hands. When he saw that she was out of reserves and that she had surrendered, he stood, dropping her into the dust, letting her go. She jumped to her feet, spat at him, lifted into the air and sailed quickly out of his reach, constantly muttering the vilest threats she could summon from her throat to her lips.

He stood, laughing.

She hurried away into the wind, lost in the darkness, shrieking curses to the four corners of the night

...

Chapter Five: INTO LELAR

? The dawn came with a million fingers and pried away with golden nails until the darkness had been levered out of sight. The sky slipped from ebony to amber and from amber to green. The green soon was streaked through with blue. The blue came to dominate and the day was then completely upon them.

Jake ate breakfast from his knapsack, feasting on the fruits and dried meats that Kell had prepared and packed for him, washing down the cheese and tough, dry bread with short swigs of sweet wine from his canvas canteen. Kaliglia satisfied himself with devouring half the copse that Cheryn the witch had hidden in the night before.

"I should thank you for saving my life," Jake said after finishing his meal.

The beast turned to face him, a small berry bush half-munched in its great maw. It chewed for a few moments, accompanied by crunching and crackling as the bush gave way to its relentless square teeth, then swallowed noisily. Its neck rippled as the remnants of the bush shoved down and into the dragon's stomach. "Oh, that's all right. Hardly means anything anyway."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"If you insist on going into Lelar—"

"That again!"

"—then I'm afraid your life will be taken sooner or later anyway."

"You do have a one-track mind."

"When it comes to Lelar, yes."

"For the last time, Kaliglia, the strange hole in Lelar's castle wall could be the link between probability lines that I need. Kell has seen it only once, but even she made the connection when I told her of my story. I must find that portal. I've got to return home. It is too difficult for me to accept a world where Talented rule supreme and where I will never have any hope of becoming anything because I was not born a mutated superman."

"Well, I think it's foolish."

Jake stood and threw his knapsack over his shoulders. He approached the beast, wagging a finger. "Look, are you going to serve me or not?"

"Well—"

The dragon tore the leaves off another shrub, munched on them.

"The Sorceress Kell did not tell me you were a coward."

"Coward?"

"So it would appear to me."

"I'm just not foolhardy is all. I like to think things out before I go running around brainlessly, asking for trouble. I like to think things out."

"Damn it, so do I. I've thought. I must go to the castle of Lelar in hopes that the hole in the wall is a portal back into my own probability line, a door warped open by the nuclear war—since the castle was built on the sight of a major blast, built to encompass the shimmering spot in the air that had drawn Lelar's attention and was mistaken, at first, for a powerful talisman. There are stories of people disappearing from my world. Perhaps they disappeared into the analog of this hole in Lelar's wall."

"And they never came out here. You are the first of your kind to have come to this place. Have you ever thought about that?"

"Yes."

"And you still want to go on?"

“Yes.”

“Then you are most assuredly a fool.”

Jake turned and walked off toward the bridge.

The dragon watched him until he had set foot upon it. “Hey,” Kaliglia called at last, “where are you go-ing?”

“I may be a fool but I am no coward, Kaliglia of the Faint Heart.”

The dragon snorted and tossed its head. It lumbered away from the copse and up to the wide span of stone that linked the two sides of the gorge. “Get on.”

“You're coming with me?”

“I never said I was a coward. You did.”

Jake rounded the massive front legs and clambered up the thick-scaled side, mounting the horn of the nat-ural saddle. “I apologize.”

Kaliglia snorted.

The beast marched forward onto the stone after only the briefest of hesitations, waddling step after step across the gorge. On both sides, the possible fall was tremendous and ended not with a floor of flat rock—which would have been bad enough and deadly enough—but in a jumble of broken stones whose pointed ends would make fast mincemeat of anything dropped from the bridge.

Still, they crossed without incident, reaching the solid ground on the other side without even a single close call or slipped foot. Kaliglia stopped, sighing heavily now that he was sure disaster was about to be theirs. Jake slid down and put hand to eyes to ward off the bright sun, searching the way ahead. A hundred feet on, a thick forest of what appeared to be elm trees stood sentinel over the foothills and the mountains be-yond. The way through the woods would be rough, and Kaliglia would have to squeeze through here and there, but there could be no turning back now.

Kaliglia moaned slightly. “The woods are dark.”

“See,” Jake said, turning back to his mammoth com-panion, “I told you we would not be greeted with evil incarnate upon setting foot in Lelar. No kingdom is any more evil than others. This place has as much sun-shine and fresh air as we had on the other side of the gorge.”

Kaliglia snorted, started to answer, but was cut short by a sharp screaming and the flapping of leath-ery wings . . .

Chapter Six: MAN BATS

Something dark and solid struck Jake across the chest like a lightning bolt left over from the previous evening's storm, barreling him backwards, head over heels on the hard earth. He rolled sideways, cracking his skull on the hard earth. His ears rang as if a thousand bells were playing in syncopated rime. His vision turned to globs of light without shape—globs of light that spun around and around, up and down, from corner to corner of his eyeballs. He tried to force himself to clear up the jumble of light and see straight, but it was not an easy thing . . .

Abruptly, he was aware of a sharp-tongued fire burning in his sides, bursting up through his chest. He felt the warm flow of blood, his own blood, soaking his ragged shirt. With an extra burst of adrenalin, he was able to clear his vision. When he saw what hung before him, he almost wished he had been able to retain the blurred world where shapes and characteristics were unknown. The thing on him was a demon for sure. The face was partly human, but the majority of it had been given over to Nature to play around with in one of her more drunken spells, and she had played quite imaginatively. The broad forehead jutted imposingly out over two narrow, slitted, and deep-set black eyes. There was no white at all to those eyes, just blackness from edge to edge. A deflated nose split the eyes and dropped down the middle of the face, a nose without cartilage, so that it almost did not exist, save for a slight depression in the skin and two ragged nostrils where that ended. Below the nose, just after a short, thin upper lip, was a mouth crammed full of canine teeth that snarled and tangled one another and a purple, darting tongue.

Jake felt claws against his flesh again, realized the demon was laughing at his weakness. He sucked in breath, shivered from toe to scalp, coughed on the fetid odor of the beast's breath, and kicked upward with all of his might, using his body as a lever between earth and demon. The demon was not particularly heavily built, and Jake flung it aside with little trouble. Had he reacted sooner, he might have saved himself the slashes from the foot claws of the beast, for he was obviously the physical superior to it. He could see now that it was about the size of a twelve-year-old boy and flaunted a pair of leathery wings that stretched from its deformed and withered arms and attached to the flesh at its sides, giving it the look of a bat—a weird, mutated man-bat. It rolled to its feet where he had thrown it and stood facing him, hissing between its rows of razor teeth, dancing irritably back and forth on clawed feet so that the claws clicking against the hard earth made the sound of castanets. The end of each wing and withered arm was also topped with four claws on the end of four emaciated, nearly all-bone fingers.

Jake remembered the knife in his knapsack. Kell had given it to him with the warning that he might find it necessary in Lelar. But this world had proved so singularly peaceful up until now that he had carelessly left it with the food and the wine. He backed toward the sack where it had been thrown in the first moments of the battle. If he could reach it and grab the knife, he would be on more equal footing with the demon.

The manbat, however, seeing the direction in which he edged and apparently grasping some of the import of his retreat, leaped into the air, cawing madly, and threw itself upon him once again, digging knifelike claws into his shoulders and bearing him to the earth in a flutter of leathery wings.

Jake smashed a fist upward and felt flesh give before it. It was an altogether satisfying feeling under the circumstances. Blood burst out of the creature's shriveled nose, a rich, scarlet blood. It splattered across his face, warming him where it touched, exciting him. He drove the fist back again, skidded it over the manbat's cheek, slashing his floppy ear along the edge so that blood leaked out there, too.

The manbat loosened its grip and flopped off him, staggering back a few paces to assess its wounds. It hissed, wiped a wing across its battered face, trying to staunch the flow of blood.

The knapsack lay behind.

The fight had advanced.

The knapsack lay too far behind to reach in time.

Jake didn't wait for the enemy to decide upon a course of action. He acted first. He rushed it, leapt upon it before it could completely judge the meaning of his movements. He throttled it to the ground, hands laced about its skinny neck, choking it, firmly pinning its shoulders with his knees. It screamed, frothing blood and saliva about its yellowed teeth. It twisted its neck, trying to snap at his wrists, but he held it too solidly, his grip strengthened by panic, and it could not gain its freedom that way. It writhed under him, furious for a means of escape, finally throwing its feet up and clutching at his sides with the terrible, sharp claws. Again he felt the nails bite into his flesh and twist left, right, left. Again, he began to seep blood. But then his hands had done their work. The thin throat suddenly crushed inward upon itself. Blood bubbled out of the beast's mouth and over Jake's hands, bathing his fingers in gore.

But panic still coursed through his fingers, charging them with jerking, electric power. Still he throttled it, unwilling to cease until the panic had drained from him and the demon was dead beyond doubt. He could feel the sharp points of broken bones punching through the thing's flesh, and he could see the blood streaming from its mouth and nostrils, but he wanted to give it no chance, and he wanted to let it suck the horror from him, as if the contact of his hands about its neck could do just that. A madness filled him that bordered on hysteria. When he had finished and the madness was nearly gone, he had almost wrung the manbat's neck free of its shoulders.

He stood, trembling, wiping his stained hands over his jeans. He ached in every muscle from the exertion of the battle, but there were other, more serious aches that were wounds. He caught hold of his head as it threatened to go dancing again, stopped the spinning lights. He staggered to his knapsack and plopped down next to it, stripping off his shirt and examining the wounds—two small ones in his shoulders that had already ceased to bleed, and several longer, more active cuts on his sides where the claws had raked. Still, the cuts were relatively clean. The demon had had little chance to work at and worry them into raggedness.

"Are you all right?" Kaliglia asked, lumbering close to him and clucking his mammoth tongue in sympathy this time, not in admonition.

He shook his head, anxious now only to suck the air and replenish his dried and aching lungs.

"I warned you of Lelar."

"What—" His lack of breath denied him words. He sat drawing air for a while longer until the dizziness went away and his throat felt less constricted. "What was that?"

"A manbat. Lelar uses them to guard his castle walls, but I had not thought to warn you of them, for they never appear this far from the castle itself. It is a very strange thing to find one here."

"His army, then?"

"More or less."

"I'm afraid of infection," Jake said, tenderly touching his wounds, spreading the lips of the cuts and watching the clean blood well out to wash away as much dirt as possible.

"Some of the wine—" the dragon suggested.

But before he could finish, the flapping of wings stirred them to look at the sky. Six of the leathery predators were sweeping over the trees. They hardly moved their wings at all, but seemed mostly to glide on the air currents, flapping only to gain height once they had swirled too low. They glided toward Jake and Kaliglia. Shrill cries of hatred scored the air as they saw the body of their fallen comrade, cries as bitter and chill as a sharp January wind carrying whispers of ice and sleet and snow.

Jake fumbled in his knapsack and brought out the long-bladed knife that Kell had given him. It was a beautiful piece of workmanship, the blade and handle all of one piece of metal, the handle beset with pieces of semiprecious stones in a double ring around the base of the hilt. But he was not thinking of the beauty at the moment, not with ugliness circling so close overhead. He tested the blade against his thumb, found that it was very sharp indeed. He pushed to his feet and addressed Kaliglia, keeping his eyes on the winged demons above. "I'll stand with my back to you. They can only come at me from one direction then."

“Good,” the dragon said, nodding his mammoth head, swaying his serpentine neck to follow the flight of the manbats.

Then the first of the soldier bats dropped, whining in at him like a bullet, fluffing its wings at the last second to slow its wicked descent. Moving as quickly as his strained muscles would allow, Jake fell into a crouch, holding the knife between his knees with both hands, the blade directed outward. When the manbat was almost on him, he swept the blade upwards in an arc, ending with it held back over his head. It sliced through the manbat's chest, spilling its blood and guts across his feet. The thing gave a feeble chitter and collapsed on him, limp. He shoved it backward, kicked it out of the way with his foot, and turned to watch the remaining five as they circled above, black-black eyes glittering insanely like pools of night lit loose here in the morning sunshine.

“Good,” Kaliglia said, urging him on. The biggest was too large for this sort of close-quarters fighting and could serve only as a wall of protection for his comrade.

A second manbat dropped, more careful than the first. It landed a dozen feet in front of him and stood hissing at him, flapping its wings furiously without lifting from the ground, obviously trying to throw fear into him—more fear than already bubbled wildly through his veins.

As it stood facing him, he was able to note, for the first time, that about its right leg was a small, black band emblazoned with a brilliant orange crescent—most likely the colors and symbol of the House of Lel-ar. If one of King Lel-ar's manbats was an oddity this far from the castle, then what could it mean to find seven of them—and perhaps more as yet unseen—so close to the ravine? But that was not a question to worry over now. Now he must only watch the manbat in hopes of determining when it would—Leap!

He raised an arm, smashing against its outflung claws and legs, throwing it backwards. The impact would have knocked him from his feet, too, had he not the solid flank of the dragon to rest upon. The manbat tumbled away, scrambled to its feet again, hissing at him, eyes blazing dark flames. Saliva dripped over its glittering yellow teeth.

He fingered his knife, held it before him and waved it at the manbat. The beast only hissed contemptuously and danced lightly on its clawed feet, waiting for an opening.

There was a sudden flapping from above as another bat dived.

He brought the knife up as before, splitting the diving manbat's stomach and knocking it aside. But in the short time his attention had been diverted to meet that more immediate danger, the first manbat had crossed the space between them and was on him, screaming its triumph to the circling congregation overhead who echoed it back, sharing their comrade's joy at victory.

The demon had overestimated its leap, however, and though striking him with one foot, overshot and smashed the left foot into the flank of the dragon. The blow had been hard, for the manbat had crippled itself, also snapping off two of the four claws on the foot and bending the entire chief joint into a crazy angle. While it was bringing the good claw around for a try at his neck, Jake jabbed the knife out, felt it crunch through facial tissue and cartilage—the light creatures seemed to have almost no bone as such—with a sickening gurgling noise. Blood fountained up around the hilt. He had caught the beast directly below the right eye, and the stab had been instantly fatal. He pulled the blade out, kicked the beast's body aside, and stood, swaying against the dragon.

Another manbat dived.

Jake brought his arms around, positioning the knife between his knees for the defensive swipe, but deep inside his body told him he could not adequately respond to another challenge so soon after the last battle. He was doomed, his aching arms weakened too much to move quickly enough . . .

Suddenly the air was rent with a violent scream as Kaliglia shot his neck out, opened his enormous maw, and snapped the manbat right out of the air, crushing it between his vegetarian's teeth and dropping it to the ground. It wriggled for a moment, all broken, and finally lay still.

“Congratulations,” Jake wheezed, gathering his breath.

“We have to work together if together we wish to survive.”

“Wise sayings yet?”

“A Truth.”

“What happened to your cowardice?”

“You were the one who said I was cowardly, not I.”

“I apologize again.”

The great dragon sniffed haughtily and turned to regard the two remaining manbats that drifted cautiously out of reach of his slender neck and round, blunt, crushing teeth.

The two manbats circled for a time, flapping when-ever they came down too close to the dragon. Finally, the smallest of the two detached itself from the bare remnants of the formation and streaked back over the trees, cawing noisily. The first still flew above, eyeing the two ground creatures with distaste. It, too, Jake could see now, bore the insignia of the House of Lelar, the black leg band and the orange crescent.

It seemed that they stood a long time, waiting for the remaining demon to make a move. Then, just as Jake was about to suggest they move on and to hell with it, the air was filled with the reverberation of beating wings . . .

“Oh, no,” he heard himself mutter.

The dragon muttered something equally appropriate.

They watched the trees . . .

Waiting . . .

A dozen manbats came over the treetops, joining the lone sentinel that had kept guard over the two ground creatures for them. For many minutes, the group circled as a unit, evidently discussing the best way to attack. Perhaps five minutes later, a pair of bats detached themselves from the flight pattern and dropped like stones toward Jake where he stood backed against his companion's meaty thigh.

Kaliglia snapped at the nearest, tore its left wing off. It plummeted to the ground and lay screaming and writhing.

The second passed the mammoth jaws unharmed and swooped in on Jake. The man held the stance that had proven successful before, slightly crouched with the knife in both hands between his knees. At the last possible second, he gutted the demon, sweeping up-ward with the blade as its claws touched him, tossing it backwards into death . . .

Above, the eleven remaining beasts seemed to go into consultation, swarming together and chittering furiously, now and then pausing to eye the man with his back against the dragon and the dragon with his long neck swaying back and forth, back and forth like some tremendous and deadly snake come alive on his shoulders.

“They almost seem to be planning their strategy,” Jake heard himself saying. It sounded like a stranger's voice, distant and strained and very unreal. He was so very tired. His eyes fluttered to close, and he had to force them open by biting on his lower lip until the pain brought him fully awake. He tasted a thin stream of his own blood.

“They probably are,” the dragon answered, clearing its throat with a base rumbling that shook its flank where Jake leaned.

The response rattled him. “You mean they're intelligent?”

“Somewhat.”

“What does that mean?” His voice was so small and hoarse that he wondered how Kaliglia could understand it so readily.

“They aren't as intelligent as you or I, but they have the cunning and basic vocabulary—in their own strange tongue—of a child of six or seven.”

“And the blood lust of a thousand-year-old soldier!”

“Perhaps.”

“What will they do?”

Kaliglia snorted again. “Whatever it is, it will not be pleasant.”

“I think you were right,” Jake said grudgingly.

“About what?”

“About Lelar.”

“What an awful time to have to waste the pleasure of saying I told you so.”

And the manbats dived.
Six of them together.
They had devised a shrewd strategy indeed.
Down . . .

Kaliglia bit at one, spat it out demolished. He swung his long neck and struck at another, ripping it apart with a violent jerk of his jaws. It did not even have time to scream. But the four others got by the wicked jaws and swooped in on Jake. Backed as he was against the flank of the huge reptile, only two could squeeze in to approach him at once—and squeezed as they were, he slashed from the left to the right with his knife before they could reach him. Left to the right—then back again, hacking their faces. Back and forth, driving them backwards until they fell, screaming and wiping blood from their ruined eyes. The next two danced in, one behind the other, having learned from the fate of the two that had gone before them. Their purpose was to hit him so closely that he could not swing fast enough to take them in close succession. Three more dived. Kaliglia got one.

The first manbat chattered loudly in a savage war whoop, lifted itself with beating wings, raked claws down Jake's cheeks. Blood sprang up in rivers inside and outside his mouth. He staggered, slid down the dragon's flank. The second manbat swept in and was upon him. He swiped feebly at it with his knife, but all his strength had left him. His arms ached and seemed to weigh nearly a ton apiece. His face was aflame with unbearable flame, and he could just swallow the blood as fast as it poured into his mouth from his damaged face. The manbat screamed wildly with knowledge of its success and swiped claws at his glazed eyes . . .

And was gone . . .
Gone!

He sat waiting for the blindness to strike him, for the darkness to flash permanently across his sight. But the day went on, void of manbats. He sat for a moment, unable to believe that they had disappeared without killing him, that they were gone and he was, temporarily at least, safe. Then, weakly, supporting himself against Kaliglia's side, he got to his feet. His knees wobbled and threatened to buckle, but he steadied himself, determined to witness whatever miracle had transpired.

The sky was free of manbats.
The bodies that had littered the earth were gone.
Only the Crimson Witch floated in the sky.
“You,” he choked, blood surging out of his cheeks.
“Me,” she affirmed from her lofty perch on no-thingness.
“But why?”
“I wanted you for myself. *I* want to kill you.”

He couldn't help himself. He laughed, was suddenly conscious of the blood thick in his mouth, and toppled forward into darkness . . .

Chapter Seven: THE CRIMSON WITCH

? She stretched the man out on the ground, shooing the dragon away despite its protests that it might be of some assistance. She lifted his lids, felt his pulse, listened to the beat of his weakened heart. She wiped the blood away from his cheeks with the hem of her robe and examined the claw cuts there. They were deep, completely through the flesh so that she could pull apart the edges and see into his mouth. The flow of blood must soon be staunched, or he would die. She reached out with her mental fingers and found, to her surprise, that Kell had built his defenses against only aggressive magics. Talents used to heal or help him would work on him. She was suddenly angry with that old bitch Kell, and she snorted her contempt.

Almost, she stood and left to let him bleed to death. But then her hands were trailing over the ruin of his face, and she was remembering what he had looked like, how like she pictured a god would look come down fresh from the holy mountains. The cuts began to heal even as she thought. When she realized what she had begun, she stopped with a start, then shrugged and continued the process. Slowly but visibly, the flesh sealed together and the flow of blood ceased. The scar tissue formed, remained and hardened for a few minutes, then peeled and fell away. Where the cuts had been, there was only soft, pink flesh. Still, she concentrated until the new skin blended perfectly with the old and the face was as handsome as she remembered it.

Carefully, she stripped off the remnants of the clawed and torn shirt and examined his other wounds. She marveled once more at the smooth muscles of his delightful body . . .

She shook her head free of such thoughts and concentrated on healing that body. Healing it, nothing more . . .

When this was done, she reached into his mind and planted the seeds of wakefulness so that he stirred and fluttered his eyes and looked up full into her face, locking his eyes on her green-green eyes. His gaze became fear-filled, then suddenly changed, melted into a gaze of curiosity. He raised his hands slowly and felt along his jaw line, ran his fingers over his cheeks, marveling at the smoothness of them. He dropped his hands to his sides, probed with his fingers for the places he had been slashed, realizing that they were completely gone, removed without the faintest trace. "How—"

"I healed you," she said contemptuously.

"But I thought—"

"Kell is a wise old witch. She made you immune to magics that are meant to harm you while leaving you perfectly open to magics that are to help and heal you."

"And you healed me so that you might kill me later?" He grinned.

She snorted.

"Well?"

"Yes!"

He grinned again, sat up. "Well, kill me then."

She looked at him, shrugged. "Later."

"No. Now."

She stood.

He stood. "Now," he said, opening his arms to her.

She backed away.

He approached her. "Kill me now if you're so anxious for the pleasure."

She started to levitate.

He ran forward, grabbed her ankles and towed her out of the sky. “No you don't! You aren't running away again—just to come and make more trouble whenever your temper gets hot again.”

“You were almost dead,” she said in a tiny voice.

“Well, then kill me. Finish the job they started.”

He tugged her against him.

“No,” she said.

“I'll spank you then.”

“Please don't.”

“I will!”

“Please!”

“Then kill me.”

“I can't.”

She was crying now.

“Why not?”

“Because—”

“Because?”

“Because—”

“Because?”

“Because I love you damn it!”

She kicked him in the shin.

He opened his mouth, recovered slightly, closed it, still astonished.

She kicked him again. “Let me go!”

“What did you say?”

“You heard it, damn you!” She mumbled a curse at him.

“I want to hear it once more.”

He squeezed her arms.

Behind, Kaliglia rumbled to remind them of his presence.

“I love you, you overbearing bastard!”

“But—”

“Oh, shut up!”

She kicked him again.

“What are you kicking me for?”

“To make you let me go.”

He held her tighter.

Kaliglia grumbled again, turned his back.

“Let me—go!”

He kissed her.

She kicked his shin one last time. Then she kissed him, too, holding him tightly, crying and kissing and trembling against him.

Kaliglia walked off toward the woods, hanging his head between a couple of trees and examining the way they would soon have to trod. If they were still going to the Castle Lelar, that was.

Jake touched the double clasp that held her crimson robe about her.

She kissed him.

He kissed back.

The robe slipped away, and the sun was dimmed by a greater light.

Kaliglia began humming a tune the Sorceress Kell sang a great deal, drowning out all other noises be-hind . . .

Chapter Eight: A JOINING OF FORCES

? Kaliglia, after a discreet amount of time and after the noises of love no longer required his song to mask them, returned from his vigil of the forest floor and laid down next to them where they sat at the scene of the battle and the curing and the love-making, discuss-ing strategy. After the preliminaries of the discussion had been passed and the embarrassment of all had been relieved quite quickly by Jake's open mood, Kaliglia and Cheryn agreed that the first manbat had most likely attacked out of sheer meanness, anxious for sport and lusting for the taste and smell of human blood. When Jake had slaughtered the first and Kaliglia and he had dispatched most of the second wave, the creatures had grown frightened and—perhaps more important and more deadly—maddened for revenge, and had gone to get comrades to finish him off, not counting on an intervening witch and her powerful magics to put a stop to their violence.

“Manbats are not Talented,” Cheryn said, lacing her fingers, pulling her knees between her arms, and rest-ing her delicate chin upon her knees. “They're only Mues, mutants, twisted creatures warped by the Hid-den Flames of the Great Fire. Something like Kaliglia here. Oh, we had his sort of dragon-lizard before, but not one with the ability to talk. Still, he cannot use magics, and neither can the manbats.”

“But when the manbat went to summon aid,” Jake said, “he didn't go very far. He slipped away and was out of our sight no more than a few minutes. Certainly it would take him longer than that to reach Castle Le-lar and gather fighting comrades.”

“Yes,” she agreed, shaking her head so that her long, black hair tumbled over her shoulders, shook against the sweet curve of her breasts where they bulged against her brilliant robe. “Yes, that is true enough. It raises other possibilities for answers. Chiefly, it indi-cates that there is a detachment of manbats somewhere within the neighborhood. What size that detachment is could be a serious question that could impede our progress. It would be wise to move forward slowly and to begin moving relatively soon before the others—if there are others, perhaps we defeated the entire detachment—discover the missing demons and set out searching for them.”

“But why” Kaliglia said perplexedly, “would there be so many demons so far from the castle walls? They only patrol the castle and the city, not the open plains.”

“We may never discover the answer to that—if we're lucky,” Cheryn said, shivering and drawing her arms tighter about her.

“You're afraid of them?” Jake asked, remembering how she had ashed them in one fell swoop, leaving no traces of their fiendish corpses or of the corpses of those he had already killed.

“I am afraid of anything that is Lelar's. He is a pow-erful Sorceror.”

“He's Talented?”

“Of course. Who but a Talented could become a king?”

“Let's go, then.”

“Wait,” she said, scrunching her bare toes on the hard-packed ground, digging her toenails in and mak-ing little lines about her feet.

“What is it?”

“What are you seeking in Lelar? You have not yet said.”

He hesitated, his mind unsure of what he should let his tongue say. He had yet to feel he could really trust anyone here but Kell, for only Kell had done for him a thing that was helpful and protective. No. No, that was not altogether so. This witch before him had done something for him that had no harm in it and was pro-ective in a way. And this second time, it had been of her volition; there was no question of

rape. He let his eyes roam over her, devouring her fair face, her flow-ing midnight locks, the ample curves of her woman's body, the slender lines of her calves and ankles where they slid from beneath the robe. Finally, he nodded his head as much to himself as to her and got up, scroung-ing around for a stick, returning to sit next to her when he had found one of suitable length and thick-ness. He began drawing a line on the dust coat of the earth. "This is the world I come from," he said, indi-cating the line. "Imagine everything that happens there—all the lives and places and things and events and thoughts and hopes and dreams—summed up in this line. Okay?"

"In just a line?"

"Yes. Look, the farther the line goes, the more mod-ern the era it represents. Any dot on it is a year. The longer I draw it, the more ancient the beginning of it becomes. The moving point always represents the present. The undisturbed dust before the stick is the future."

"I understand."

Kaliglia grumbled, strained his neck over both of them and watched the stick with interest.

Jake looked to the girl and the dragon, and seeing that they really did grasp his analogy, he continued. "At some point in history, this worldline split into two worldlines. As time went on, your world developed more rapidly than did mine. Your people discovered atomic energy long before my people did. The worlds had split, and yours rushed toward modernity faster than mine. But yours also rushed toward something else, something darker." He drew a fork in the line and continued each branch for a distance to show what it was he meant. "This branch represents my world," he said, indicating the nearer. "And this other is yours." He marked a large X on her worldline. "About here, your people had an all-out atomic war, nuclear holo-caust."

"Nuclear war?" She looked puzzled.

"You call it the Great Fire."

"Oh, yes! I remember that they were the same now. But it has been a long time since we have used the more mystical term. We now call it the Great Fire and are done with it."

"That's because you've forgotten what 'nuclear' means."

"I—Yes, that is so."

Kaliglia cleared his throat, sighed, anxious for the explanation to continue.

"Well, I won't go into the meaning of 'nuclear.' If that has been lost, there are too many basics to cover before any real understanding could be given you. But you see now that I came from this first worldline into yours."

"But how did you cross the gap between them?"

"Through the use of a drug called PBT."

"That is?"

"A psychic chemical that works on the mind. Syn-thetic chemical. Somehow, the overdose I took gave me the psionic ability to open a pathway between the worldlines, gave me a means of bridging that gap so that I merely had to step through a crack in the wall to enter your world. But I ended up here without the power to return to my own line. Stranded."

"And what has this to do with Lelar?"

"In Castle Lelar—"

"You plan to go inside?" she asked, obviously with utter disbelief.

"He sure enough does," Kaliglia confirmed, nod-ding his head and clucking his tongue so that the air reverberated with a drumlike pounding.

"But—"

"Please," Jake said, "don't try to dissuade me. I'm determined that I am going back to my worldline. I need the portal in the Castle Lelar. If it is what I be-lieve it is, I think it will take me back."

"Portal?"

"There is a place in the wall of the throne chamber in Castle Lelar, a place where men can be pushed through into apparent nothingness, as if great spaces, universes, existed between the bricks and the outside. It may, just may, be a link to my world. What little I know of it makes it seem worth a try. It's all I have."

She looked thoughtful. She looked beautiful. “Lelar is an evil old man.”

“I am going anyway, despite his orange crescent and his manbats.”

“And there are far more manbats in the capital city than we have yet faced. Thousands more.”

“I can't be convinced to give it up.” Even so, he could feel the clutching claws of hundreds of demons, the bared fangs raking his chest, the hot, heavy, ugly breath steaming in his face . . .

“He's bullheaded,” Kaliglia assured her.

Cheryn seemed not to notice the beast's remark. She pursed her lips, considering the dangers, thinking how best to outline them for her lover. “And there will be other things. Things that crawl. Things that slither. Things with claws in their mouths and teeth on their tails so that outside seems inside and inside seems out-side when you have to fight one. Lelar will summon every sort of Mue to challenge us before he lets us breach his sacred walls.”

“But why should he? I had planned merely on ask-ing him to let me try it, volunteer to go through his portal for him—since he seems anxious to experiment with other people's bodies.”

“You can't do that!”

Jake frowned and snapped the drawing stick be-tween his fingers. “And why not?”

“First of all, Lelar will torture you to find out how you came to know of the hole in the wall. I doubt that it is common knowledge within the city. Secondly, he will torture you to discover your motive. He will not be so foolish as to think that someone would volunteer without motive for what, to anyone else, would be a horrid adventure. He will discover the truth about the portal. If it is a doorway to your worldline, he will know.”

“I can stand torture, if it means he will eventually stuff me into that damn hole!”

“Let me finish,” she protested, thrusting her pretty lips into a pout.

“Go on.”

“And when he discovers that there is another world beyond—if you are correct in your assumptions—do you think he won't want to conquer a piece of it for his kingdom? He is a vain old man. Knowing a world lay untouched by his power would be too much for him.”

Jake laughed.

“What's so funny?”

“Yeah,” Kaliglia questioned, too. “What?”

“It's just that neither of you understand my world,” Jake said, standing and waving his arms wide. “It's big. Damn big. Bigger, by far, than that old fart Lelar. So big it could swallow him up. It could gobble him whole in less than a day, and he would be lost and afraid and no threat at all. My world is much like what your world must have been before the nuclear war here. The cities number in the millions, not in the thousands. Your castles would fit into the lobbies of our largest buildings. On our highways, there are great chemical-eating dragons, some larger than Kal-iglia, that prowl all hours of the day and night, me-chanical dragons built by the people of my world, tamed by them. Lelar would be the little fish in the big pond, and he wouldn't last.”

“Tell me something,” Cheryn said, eyeing him wisely.

“What?”

“Do they have Talented in your world?”

“My God, no! That's what's so wonderful about it. In my worldline, a man doesn't spend his entire life suppressed and oppressed by witches and warlocks and sorcerers!”

“Then your world would fall to Lelar.”

“Huh?”

“Imagine a Talented set loose in your world, hiding and unknown. Imagine a man set loose in your world who could control the weather, bringing great floods, great blizzards, hurricanes, hail storms. A man who can maneuver matter with his mind, moving it where he wants it as quickly as he wants, a man who could cause the earth itself to shift beneath your cities and tumble them into ruins. A man who can even work to bend another man's will somewhat. A man who—it has been rumored among the Talented for sometime now, rumored by those least given to deceit—can, when his powers are at a peak, even read the basic thoughts of another man. He's the only mind reader ever reported among the Talented—a

formidable power even if an erratic and weak one. What could such a man accomplish in your world?"

Jake sobered. He felt his dreams crashing down in-side his head, and his skull ached from the mortar of hope showering up in chip and clouds. "Well—"

"Wouldn't he eventually rule?"

"They have great weapons in my world—"

"He can deflect them."

"Fire—"

"Will roll off him like water, leave him unscathed."

Jake sank down on the ground once more, sucking a tooth and rubbing his scraggly beard, pushing fingers through his copious fall of hair. "I see the picture. Big and clear. And I don't like it at all. He *could* take over. Easily."

"So you can't just approach him and volunteer to go through the wall. He musn't suspect that you are interested in the wall in any way."

"But how will I get through, then?"

"I will take you."

He looked at her, somewhat astonished, realizing that it was the natural thing to expect and wondering why he had not, therefore, expected it. "You?"

"Didn't you mean what you said back there when we made love? Don't you love me, too. Don't you? Like you said?"

"Sure. Of course I do!" He grabbed her, pressed her close.

Kaliglia grunted.

"Then you would not leave me if you found the portal, you would either stay—which you have re-peatedly sworn you will not do—or you would take me with you. If you work with me and swear to take me along, I will help you with my magics, help you to reach the throne room on the base of Castle Lelar— see, you would not even know which floor to look on—and I will get us through it. Shall we agree to that?"

"Well, it might be dangerous—"

"Is this a brushoff so soon?"

"No. I agree." He hugged her, bit at her neck, rubbed his beard over her face, smelling the warm femaleness of her, enjoying the yielding curves of her young body.

"Do they shave in your worldline?" she asked.

"Sometimes."

"I like you smooth. Smooth, long hair and smooth face."

"I promise."

"*Now*" she said, "we ought to go."

He grinned. They started to stand, jumped erect. A sound from something very large and very near came booming through the trees in a singsong warble based with a moan that sounded much like a huge bird . . .

The dungeon was adance with ghostly tongues of blue psionic light as part of Lelar's mind dealt with providing illumination. The bare earthen floor glowed dully with it as if it were burnished copper, the red dirt swirling without gleaming, bright without seeming bright. The walls, wet and moss-coated, gleamed brightly in spots, reflecting the glow. The one barred window set high in the wall behind the hag showed twinkling stars and a few dark forms of light clouds.

Against the far wall, the hag stood. Her hair fell to her waist, tangled into greasy knots, gray streaked with snow white, white like the center of the sun must be, white like the legends said the center of the Great Fire had been. She was dressed in leather and burlap, the traditional materials of hags, and her feet were crudely sandaled with leather straps and pads of leather for soles.

At the hag's feet lay the bodies of two blasted, charred manbats. They lay in a tangle of crisped wings and shriveled legs, their eyes either singed from their sockets or staring straight ahead at nothingness.

They were the manbats that had helped to bring her here while Lelar rode control on her. They had not lived to walk away from her once he had lost his complete crush on her psionic abilities.

“Listen!” Lelar snarled across the bare earth at her.

“I refuse.”

“I am winning,” he said. He straightened his fur-edged greatcoat to show that he had energy for minor things aside from the contest of magics. “Look, I can even maintain the light and fight you at the same time.”

“The . . . light . . . will . . . grow . . . dim . . . Lelar,” she said. But her voice was lacking the booming, commanding tone that it had first contained when she had been brought into the spider-web threaded rooms, under the dark and dripping stone arches, Lelar holding a candle because he was reserv-ing all of his power to completely clamp her magics down until she could be placed in the dungeon and worked over. Yes, then it had been a strong and de-fiant voice. But now it was weak and contained a note of resignation that Lelar noted and appreciated.

“The light stays bright, and I press the attack!”

She screamed.

He stabbed again with his psionic knife.

She choked off this scream, still tough enough to deny him the pleasure of hearing it.

She struck back, catching him unawares and drop-ping him to his knees.

She allowed herself a hope of victory.

She twisted her spurred magic blade in his brain.

But the light did not dim.

He lunged back.

She screamed as he twisted the magic knife, spinning open her thoughts and peeling them like ripe fruit.

She passed out.

When she woke, there was still light.

She tried to strike him.

Her blade of mental force moved slowly.

Through syrup . . .

He shielded.

Her blow was deflected harmlessly.

She tried again.

Missed again.

He stabbed.

She screamed.

“You are mine,” he said. “I have taken your powers and have tamed them from tigers into kittens. You will do my bidding from this time forth. And I warn you, you wicked old bitch, that refusal to do what I com-mand will meet with the slowest and most horrible of deaths. I have keyed your powers. I have locked them away from me. You will never harm me. You have no arm with which to hit back.”

She tried again.

He stabbed, stabbed, stabbed until she was babbling.

And still, still there was light . . .

Chapter Nine: THE THOBS

? Again the air was rent with the eerie cry. It shifted up and down the musical scale, never producing music, a piercing ululation that chilled Jake through and through until he fancied he could hear his bones rattling at the joints, banging and clacking against one another within the meager and trembling sack of his skin. He forced his lips to suck in air to his aching lungs. He wet his lips with his almost dry tongue, squeezed it against the roof of his mouth to gain some saliva and tried again. He found, at last, his voice where it had hidden deep within his throat. "What the hell is that?"

Cheryn shook her head doubtfully. Black hair flew. But there was no need to answer his question, for the thing that was screaming showed itself just then . . .

It came around the edge of the woods, knocking over a small tree and crushing bushes and logs beneath it, rolling over stones that lay in its pathway, never, ever going around anything. It came forward like a tank, like the greatly increased tread of a tank some-how enlarged and enlarged and enlarged—and given sentience. It was a great worm of sorts, easily a hundred feet in length, each glossy, yellow segment perhaps four or five feet across and bristled with various sizes and lengths of black and orange and yellow hairs. Its main segment towered fifty feet in the air as it moved in front of the grove, its anterior segments thrusting off the ground, another fifty feet of posterior kicking and writhing, propelling it toward them at a frightening speed. It was vaguely reminiscent of a centipede, the one insect that Jake, always and still, had irrationally feared in his own worldline, though its glossy segments were studded with the underdeveloped cilia instead of real legs, and though it could not truthfully be said it scitter-walked like a centipede but slithered, instead, like a blacksnake, head whipping high and proud.

Head . . . The oral segment itself was enough to give him nightmares for the rest of his life. The bulb of yellow flesh, devoid of hair and, therefore, naked in comparison to the cilia-marked other segments was capped by a sucking, oval mouth that drew upon the air like a vacuum cleaner. Two sensory swaths comparable to eyes and two others apparently for olfactory sensitivity ringed that mouth with pulsating gray light filling them like dimmed light bulbs.

"Run!" Jake shouted. "We can't fight it!"

"Where?" she asked. She thought of lifting herself, but she could not lift him, except perhaps with a great wind. But she could never leave the dragon to its mercy, and the dragon would need too large a wind, indeed.

"Back over the bridge," he answered.

They turned and stumbled toward the natural bridge that Jake and Kaliglia had passed over not very long ago, Jake holding Cheryn with his arm, the giant reptile lumbering last, protecting their rear from the horror that moved after them.

But they had gone only half the distance to the gorge when there was a screeching and chittering ahead of them—and a second centipedelike monster pulled itself over the gorge wall onto the bridge, successfully blocking their departure. They stood for a moment, watching it in disbelief. Then they turned. The first beast was gaining on them, its mouth drawing in air with an audible, wet gurgling, blowing it out again through another hole in its fifth segment.

"They're Thobs!" Cheryn said in sudden realization. Her tone was based on joy.

"What?" Jake pressed her close, his heart racing. His mind was filled with centipede scenes from his home worldline—finding them in the bathroom of their summer cottage and racing for someone to come and kill them . . . And now all those wriggling, hairy centipedes that he had had lulled were coming back,

larger—much, much larger!—than life to revenge themselves . . .

“There must be a Talented nearby,” she explained. “Perhaps there was one traveling with the manbats. These beasts are not real. They're Thought Objects. Thobs.”

“Then we have nothing to fear?”

“Oh, yes we do!”

“But—”

“They could kill us easily if they were real. And they can still kill us even though they have a thought-coagulation substance that can have affect on this world, a cohesion of pseudo-matter, psionic force. But with our own Thobs, we can fight back!”

The centipede slithered closer, its leathery segments shushing across the ground. The second lay just across the bridge, blocking their only pathway to safety.

Cheryn wrinkled her brow, concentrated.

She muttered the appropriate curses.

Sweat beaded her forehead.

The centipede came anyway.

Suddenly the earth between them and the beast was bristled with iron spikes as long as a man's arm and as thick. The points of the spikes gleamed blackly in the sun.

The centipede rolled onto them. It screamed a different sort of scream. Its unreal insides spilled across the ground, sticky yellow fluid like syrup. It stopped approaching, tried to turn and slither off the stakes. It only gutted itself more completely. It toppled full length onto the spears, impaling itself two hundred times, and kicked out the last of its quasi-life.

“You got it!” Jake shouted, jubilant.

“Good,” Kaliglia said, relieved.

But the centipede behind them leaped up, no longer indolent, and slithered across the bridge toward them.

They turned to it.

It reared, its mouth sucking.

Cheryn squinted.

She shifted her magics into power.

It rushed them ululating.

Suddenly, the earth itself reared up beneath the beast and sent it toppling backwards. The rocks and shale and dirt beneath it boiled and slashed it as efficiently as sharp knives. It reversed, tried to get away from the phenomena. Jake could see, through the illusion, that the earth was not touched. This was only a Thob, too, this shower of cutting rocks, a mirage of nonetheless deadly force summoned to do battle with another and equally deadly mirage. At last, the Thob reared, tumbled backward over the lip of the gorge, spouting fluid, and crashed to the bottom. A hail of earth and rocks, shale and boulders followed it, burying it.

When they turned, the body of the first centipede that had been impaled on the iron stakes was gone.

So were the stakes.

Then the sky dropped.

The other Talented had liked Cheryn's trick with the rocks. He used it himself, making the sky open over them and drop upon them a wide assortment of stones, some large and some small, boulders and pebbles.

Cheryn squinted again.

Immediately, fierce winds sprang up about them, though they did not ruffle Jake's shirt or Cheryn's robe.

The rocks caught in the air streams and hurtled away, falling with heavy thuds to both sides of the trio.

Jake cheered again.

Kaliglia rumbled.

“Look for a Talented hiding in the woods,” Cheryn said between clenched teeth. “We can't keep

dodging his attacks all day. We have to know where he's at and thrust an offensive at him.”

Jake knelt and scanned the woods.

Boom-boom-boom! the rocks fell about him, shak-ing the earth but never mangling the flesh they had been summoned to mangle. As they fell, struck, and settled into stillness, they disappeared. The enemy Talented needed his magics to manufacture more to drop on them.

A flash of orange . . .

A crescent of it . . .

A black robe . . .

“I see him!” Jake snapped.

Suddenly the boulders ceased to fall.

Instead, the ground had mouths.

Sharp-toothed mouths that opened everywhere on the dirt and began snapping at their heels, their toes.

Cheryn shouted in pain.

Her right foot was bloody.

Jake stomped at a mouth, felt teeth slide across his shin. He pulled back. It got his sandal.

Kaliglia rumbled, yelped.

Abruptly, they all had steel shoes, even the dragon.

The teeth broke off as the mouths continued snap-ping at them.

Then the mouths were gone.

“Where is he?” Cheryn asked, gasping.

“There. By the large boulder. Crouched beside it. There where the two pine trees—”

“I see him.”

She squinted again.

Jake wished he could do something.

In an instant, the woods behind the enemy Talented were filled with licking red flames that swam through the trees, catching none of the branches but swarming toward the lone man crouched by the boulder where the two pine trees—

The Talented stood, knowing that he was known, no longer trying to conceal himself. The orange cres-cent of the House of Lelar rippled across the front of his costume, a challenge to Cheryn's courage. But an emblem did not phase her. The fires continued to burn through the trees, nearer and nearer to him.

He came out of the woods and stared across the field at her.

She waved.

He clenched his fists.

Jake thought he saw him squint.

Then grasses sprung up about them, grasses that grew white like albino feather creatures. But then the feathers grew wet and sleek like strings. The strings writhed like worms.

Cheryn speeded up the advance of the flames.

The man continued walking toward them.

The white worms laced about their feet.

Jake jerked his leg to free it but could not move. The white worm-grass-feathers held him securely, crept up his legs, growing longer and longer, wrap-ping his ankles now.

The dragon was also victimized. It pulled its mas-sive legs, trying to rid itself of what had at first seemed like a nuisance but now threatened to be a serious, death-filled plague. He couldn't move any more than Jake.

Cheryn was perspiring heavily now.

Her face was strained and weary.

She drew the flames closer. They danced a hundred feet into the air, madly crackling and hissing.

The man came on.

The white worm grasses had tangled about Jake's waist now, had snared his left arm and was wrapping it right to his side. He choked off the screams that bub-bled wildly in his throat and tried to

concentrate on some line of action. The Talented was going to try to outlast them, to bind them here until he could come and finish them off without Thobs, choke them with his bare hands—all but the dragon, of course. He held his right arm over his head so that he might have one hand, at least, to fight back with, one hand to punch and claw with.

The Talented came nearer.

Flames crackled.

The white worms slithered over his neck, his chest securely tied, laced about his upheld arm and drew it, inexorably, back to his side, lacing it where he could not use it.

The enemy Talented was, perhaps, only fifty feet away.

He could feel the flames of the fake fire.

Cheryn's fire . . .

Now useless . . .

The worm grasses clamped shut his gaping mouth, sealed his lips with their sticky tendrils.

They began growing up his nose.

He tried to scream.

His mouth was sealed.

So this was how it was to end. The tendrils would grow up his nose, fill his sinus cavities, seek his brain, cracking bone with their pressure. They would grow through his skull, devour his gray matter and turn him into a babbling, senseless creature before he—merci-fully—slipped into death . . .

The Talented was only twenty-five feet away.

The fire behind him died.

The ground beneath his feet developed mouths.

He created magic steel shoes.

Boulders fell on him.

He made a wind to toss them aside.

But then Cheryn threw the last and most dangerous ploy into action. Suddenly, directly beside the man, she created a centipede Thob, towering above them, ready to strike all three of them and the dragon down. It was risking their own lives with their own Thob, but it put the enemy's life on the line, too.

He made spears on the earth.

But the centipede developed slimy metal skin that the spears could not penetrate.

The enemy Talented opened the sky, caused boulders to fall upon it, booming and cracking, smashing together as they fell.

But air holes opened on the metal plates, some as big as silver dollars, others as small as pencil dots, re-leased violent puffs of wind that blew the boulders away.

Cheryn made the metal-plated centipede start to fall on them . . .

The enemy held out. He saw her plan. But at the last minute, he dropped his magics and turned all of his formidable force on the Thob centipede that was about to crush and devour them.

The white worm grasses disappeared.

The enemy blasted the centipede out of the sky, turned it into flickers of purple flame and clouds of green and yellow smoke.

And when he turned . . .

. . . Cheryn blasted *him* . . .

Flames enveloped his body . . .

White . . .

White flames . . .

In seconds, his eyes were charred lumps of jelly in his sockets, and his lips had been seared from his teeth so that he grinned a skeletal grin and toppled forward onto the ground—quite obviously dead, killed by a Thob, murdered by the unreal.

Cheryn turned to Jake.

Jake smiled, reached for her, proud of what she had done, happy that they had survived and that he

could hold her again.

She took a step toward his arms and collapsed full length upon the ground, unconscious.

“It is foolishness,” Cheryn said adamantly. She crossed her fine legs and leaned against the tree trunk, scowling.

“I won't turn back.”

“That was an accidental encounter,” she said, pressing the point, “What do you think it will be like when Lelar is waiting for us, when he sets his best Talented after us, three and four at a time?”

“Think of that!” Kaliglia said, shaking his enormous head, clucking his tongue, shuffling his mammoth feet uneasily.

“Doesn't bother me.”

“Nothing bothers you!” Cheryn snapped. “You're too dense.”

Jake stood, brushed the dirt off his trousers. “If you two want to stay behind, that is okay. I had hoped— But, it's your choice.”

“You can't succeed without my magics,” Cheryn said smugly.

“I can try.”

“You mean you would go on, pitting your bare hands and Kell's silly knife against Thobs and man-bats? You'd go on without me?”

“Sure would.” He slung the depleted knapsack over his shoulders, jabbed the knife through a loop on his jeans, and took a few steps toward the forest.

“Wait,” she said, thinking furiously.

He turned, stopped. “What is it?”

She thought of a new tact now, and she smiled sweetly, ready to put it into practice. “I thought you said you loved me.”

“I do.”

Kaliglia shuffled uncomfortably.

“Then you wouldn't walk off and leave me like this.”

He smiled back, understanding her ploy. “It is not me who is leaving you. It's the other way around. I am going home, and you refuse to help me get there or to come along with me.”

She felt anger, but she tried to control it. “And once we get to your home, your worldline, what would become of me? Once you are back there—”

“I'd marry you,” he said.

She continued over him: “—with all those girls you once knew and once slept with, what would hap-pen—” She stopped, his words finally registering with her. “You'd what?”

“Marry you.”

“But—”

“I was serious. Were you?”

She stood and stamped her feet as if she were beat-ing out little fires that nibbled at her toes. “Oh! You're so damned sneaky!”

“Well!”

“I hate you.”

“I guess—” he began.

“But I love you, too.”

She crossed the space between them. “Come on, let's hurry and make a little time before darkness. Someone might come looking for the manbats and the other Talented.

“Wait,” Kaliglia said, shifting from his left foot to his right so that he wallowed like a great ship in high tide.

“What is it?” Jake asked.

“I—”

“You want out of our bargain. You want to go back to the Sorceress—”

“No, no!” the dragon protested, waddling up to them. “No, no, nothing at all like that.”

“Well?” Cheryn asked impatiently.

“I want to come along.”

“No one's stopping you,” Jake said, turning to start again.

“You don't understand.”

“Well, explain for heaven's sake! Don't hold us here until more manbats come looking for their buddies,” Cheryn said.

“I want to go through the portal with you,” Kalig-lia blurted. “I want to go back to your worldline.”

Jake dropped his mouth, almost needed his hands to push his lower jaw back into place. “Impossible!”

“No. Golgoth said the hole was wide enough to drive a dozen horses through. I'm not as big as a dozen, by any means, perhaps only as large as seven or eight. I'll fit.”

“But how could we ever get you in the castle?”

“You and Cheryn could go first. When you're in-side and ready to make your escape through the wall, Cheryn could blast open the castle with her magics, make a pathway through for me.”

“Too dangerous,” Jake said. “We don't need a mount. Cheryn can make me fly like she can, and then we will make better time than if—”

“No,” Cheryn said. “I cannot levitate and propel both of us and still be on guard against manbats and Thobs. We need a mount.” She locked her emerald eyes with Jake's blue eyes, and they seemed to communicate through the gaze alone.

“All right,” Jake said at last. “We'll work some-thing out. But why this sudden desire to plunge into the adventure with us?”

Kaliglia snorted. “It gets pretty boring around here. Awfully boring. I might be afraid, but at least some-thing interesting will be going on for a change.”

Lelar sat on his carved onyx throne, fingering the heads of dragons that formed the ends of each of the arm rests. He was dressed in white from head to foot, a white slouch hat, a white cape, a white, ruffled shirt, white trousers, and white albino deerskin boots. Only the orange crescent of Lelar on his left shoulder broke the starkness of his uniform. But despite his snowy appearance, his mood was black.

The doors to the throne room flew wide, banged against the stone walls, shuddered and were still. Four manbats shoved the hag through. She fell onto her knees, toppled onto her face. Her hands were bound behind her back by shimmering Thob rope constructed from the fringe powers of Lelar's mind.

“It is thoughtful of you to lay prone before the king,” Lelar said, smiling.

The manbats laughed and nodded at one another. One of them moved forward and kicked the hag in the side. The next instant, he was a burning lump, writhing on the floor, smoking.

“That was a bad move,” Lelar said. He thrust his psionic blade into her skull and completely scrambled her brains.

She screamed.

He made her writhe.

He made her try to climb the walls.

He made her howl like a dog and gnaw at the floor as if it were a bone.

He made her vomit and consume her own mess as a cat might.

He made her beg.

And whimper.

And plead.

And at last he released her and left her slumped on the floor, a shivering, defeated mass of flesh and, mostly, bones, a Talented without a will, the tool of a greater magic. “If you ever,” he said evenly but with malice afoot in each word, “destroy one of my men again, I will torture you for a thousand days and nights before killing you. If you ever attempt to escape, you will be bound by my will into the stone of these walls with only your head thrust out, and you will be the brunt of every foul and degrading

amusement I can discover for as long as I shall live—which shall be at least another six hundred years. You are mine. Get used to the idea, you stupid bitch. Get used to it. Live with it. You have no choice.”

She wanted to spit, but she dared not. She was get-ting used to it. She had no choice. She knew it.

“Now listen,” Lelar said, standing and pacing about the great throne room, standing at last before the hole in the left wall and watching the play of dark colors from the mysterious world beyond, “an expeditionary force of manbats, complete with its Talented super-visor, has disappeared. They should have been back this evening, but they have not arrived, and I cannot find the 'mind' of the Talented no matter how hard I search with my own magics. I must assume they have been murdered—or at least that the Talented has and does not, therefore, register with me. I want you to go in search of the first squad for any traces whatsoever giving clue to their disappearance. If you see anyone mysterious on the roads, anyone aside from Common-ers, anyone who looks capable of such destruction, I want you to bring them to me. Only another Tal-ented could have destroyed my man. But all Talented in Lelar—with your taming—are under my control. Someone new must have arrived. I want him or her or them found. Do you understand?”

She lay still, gasping for breath that was only now beginning to return to her tortured lungs.

“Do you understand?” he repeated, his voice climb-ing higher, growing tighter.

“Yes,” she wheezed.

He booted her in the side as she started to get up, knocked her flat again. “Louder.”

“Yes.”

“Louder!”

“YES!” she screamed, cursing him silently.

He turned and walked back to his throne, purposely baring his back to her as a taunt that he knew she would not take up, would not dare to take up. He turned again and sat in a swirl of white. “Then get on with it,” he snapped, dismissing her.

Chapter Ten: A DREAM OF KINGS

? They stopped for the evening, and Jake went hunting pheasants with a Thob bow and arrow. He had asked Cheryn to make, instead, a gun and bullets, but she could not, for she had never seen one of these things. She asked him to explain how it worked in hopes she could create one from the description. Jake found, however, that though he could explain what a gun did and—generally speaking—how it did it, he could not give her a diagram of the workings of the device. Such was the mind of a Twentieth-Century man, familiar with the surface of the things that sustained him but unable to work with those things on any practical level. The world of Jake's probability had become too specialized so that one man knew only one part and could not command the general picture with what skills and knowledge he held.

Anyway, he brought back two pheasants.

Kaliglia was content with devouring half the under-growth in the immediate forest, snuffling and sniffing to determine what was good and what was tasteless, what was healthful and what was poisonous. He studiously avoided the basketball mushrooms that popped round heads up here and there and concentrated on berry bushes and rhubarb which he ate by the bale.

Cheryn and Jake salvaged some of the berries before Kaliglia could mangle them or eat them himself. Cheryn roasted the fowls with her magics, causing a false fire of orange and magenta to spring up under the spit Jake had fashioned from sharpened sticks. The flames roasted the meat but did not char the wood. Soon, the aroma of cooking pheasant threaded the air and had their mouths watering. They took a bird each and used cutting utensils Cheryn created with her Talent, knives and forks of humming mind-patterns. Jake ate all parts of his bird, but Cheryn daintily concentrated on the greasy white breast meat, leaving the legs and wings.

When they were finished and the dragon had come back to curl behind them as a wall against the wind, Jake said, "What is this Lelar like? I can hardly imagine him as evil as he seems to be."

"I've only seen him once," Cheryn said. "Once when he thought to federate all Talented on both sides of the gorge, he threw a gala ball for everyone he hoped to sway to his way of thinking. He saw the Commoners as victims to be plucked, and he wanted aid from his fellow Talented to do just that. He had conquered the land to the sea and wanted to avoid a physical clash with the lands beyond the gorge (since his manbat army was greatly depleted and the number of Talented beyond the gorge was great). So the Grande Ball. I could recall it for you, implant in your mind the visions I remember."

"I'd see Lelar?"

"Oh, yes. Just as I saw him. I was eleven then."

"What do I do?"

"Nothing. Just relax, close your eyes, and try to free your mind from as much concentration as you can."

"Can do."

Kaliglia shifted and the ground roared. "Me, too," he said plaintively.

"Okay," Cheryn said, "you, too."

She began spinning her magics, calling up old memories, giving them flesh and making them dance on the underside of her companions' eyelids . . .

The great ceiling of the Grande Ballroom of the Castle Lelar had been finished at the cost of millions to the treasury of the monarch, and—it was rumored throughout the city of Lelar, among shopkeepers and laborers, drinking men and sober—had cost hundreds of lives. The room was nearly two hundred feet long and three hundred wide, and the ceiling that roofed it was on four

great arches running the width, arches made of rough-hewn wooden beams bolted together with sturdy wooden bolts that studded the length of the rafters like black jewels, one every inch around the joints so that where the beams met it seemed as if a cluster of hard-shelled beetles nested, buzzing. At the peak of each of the arches was a circular window looking upon the heavens so that the teardrop moon shown yellowly down upon the stone floor.

Cheryn stood in a darkened corner, watching the dancers.

They hobbled by her, their fantastic costumes glittering, sparkling, rustling and clattering. Here a costumed knight danced with a lady dressed as a sleek cat, black fur catching hints of the moonlight and shining with an almost phosphorescent magnificence. There, to her right, a man horned and cloved as a satyr danced with a wood nymph whose bare breasts jig-gled with each beat of the throbbing music. The two-man Talented orchestra provided the accompaniment of a forty-piece orchestra. There were many violins, now and then a guitar, sometimes a harp. There were trumpets and oboes and bassoons and pipes of various kinds. A tuba oom-pahed now and again, and the drums filled in with a steady beating as of rain upon the glass panels in the ceiling.

Cheryn worked her way among the crowd standing and laughing, drinks in their hands, around the periphery of the floor to the punchbowl. She ladled out a cupful of the brew and continued around the floor, secreting herself in another corner, eyes wide and watchful of the glory of the Grande Ball. She sipped the punch . . .

The bare-breasted wood nymph spun by, light on her toes, her satyr with his hands upon her bare wrist . . .

Everyone was laughing; the air was heavy with breath and liquor, smoke and perspiration.

Now a flute . . .

Moonlight and flutes . . .

She had been watching for some time. The dancers changed, and the tempo of the music changed, but the wonder remained as new costumes replaced the old. All of the fanciful suits were magics, culled up to cover the nakedness of their owners, magics that found their basics in the pictures and descriptions from the Old Books that dated before the Great Fire. Whenever one of the Talented grew tired of his or her costume, he simply altered it on the spot, momentarily naked, then clothed again in brilliance that transcended his previous disguise. The wood nymph had forsaken her leafed garment for a G-string and stood with her partner who was now dressed in a striped coat and wide-legged pants like a stage comedian. When the music began again, they started to dance, calling upon their magics for the energy necessary to keep them going and going and going . . . Slowly, Cheryn became aware that the two men in front of her were arguing. She slunk farther into the dark corner and tried to concentrate on the dancers.

Moonlight . . .

Tambourines . . .

One of the men cursed the other vehemently. Finally, she turned her attention to them. One was a tall, needle-thin man dressed in a black cape and tuxedo, his hands adorned with fake claws, his mouth split with false fangs. He was holding a drink, turning the glass round and round in his bony hands, looking down at the shorter, more muscular man who was dressed as a wolf, his long tail curled around his right foot, his own false fangs yellow and foam-flecked.

"You won't even listen!" the wolf said, snarling and baring his fangs so that it appeared he would sink them into the vampire's throat.

"Because it is a bad proposition, Lelar," the vampire said, fiddling with his glass, trying to keep his eyes on the dancers, but constantly letting them stray back to the shorter man before him.

Cheryn forgot the dancers completely as she remembered the descriptions of the king and tried to match them with what she could see through the wolf costume. Yes, it was King Lelar. She felt a chill go through her. She had heard all the stories . . .

"Bad proposition?" Lelar said, swallowing what was left of his whiskey. "You speak like a fool, Kra-ter. Don't you realize that Benevolency is out? We have checked our magics for too

long. We were meant to rule over the Commoners. We are divinely chosen!”

“A fine one to speak of divine choice” Krater said, turning his eyes from the dancers.

The wolf sneered. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“We’ve heard of the atrocities committed by your manbats in capturing the lands to the ocean.”

“Do they frighten you?”

It was the vampire’s turn to sneer. “You will not cross the gorge, Lelar. Don’t threaten. There are too many Talented there. You would be repelled. Why, the Talented of your own kingdom are not entirely with you.”

“Some day—” Lelar began.

“That day is a long way off, Lelar.”

The wolf was silent a moment. “It need never come. If we could federate to mutual benefit—”

“I said no”

“The atrocities that so concern you, Krater, were done without my knowledge. After all, the manbats are but highly developed animals—or highly de-volved humans. They are vicious by nature. One could not expect that I would—”

“Your own torture rooms are witness to your per-sonal sadism, Lelar”

“You speak nonsense.”

“I speak truth. We know of the torture rooms be-low this castle. We have our informants, too, Lelar. We know of the things you do, the unspeakable things. We know of the harem you have had—and what hap-pens to those you grow tired of, whose bodies are no longer varied enough to please you.”

The wolf snorted, tried to drink, found his glass empty. “Then what did you and your Talented come for?”

“For the pleasure of saying no,” Krater snapped.

Lelar, furious, threw a magic fist into Krater’s stom-ach, doubling the tall man over. He brought a magic fist down on the back of the vampire’s neck and crum-pled him to the floor.

Krater shielded himself from magic, struggled to his feet.

Lelar swung the glass.

Krater had not shielded against normal matter.

The glass caught his cheek, broke, twisted into his flesh.

Blood gurgled out of his torn face and down the wolf’s hand.

Krater disintegrated the glass.

Lelar struck out with another magic fist.

It bounced off the shield with a great display of blue sparks.

Krater struck out with his own magics and knocked Lelar to his knees.

Lelar threw up his own shield.

By now, the crowd had realized what was in prog-ress, and the dancing had stopped. For a few mo-ments, the tooting and twanging of the orchestra con-tinued. Then, as the Talented musicians saw what was happening, the music, too, ceased, and the great hall grew silent but for the whirring of the shields the two combatants had called into being.

Lelar and Krater threw bolts of hissing energy at each other, but the shields deflected them every time, dispersed them upwards in showers of blue and white sparks that were flung dangerously close to the wooden beams.

A squad of manbats entered the room, spears at ready, and backed Lelar, now and then jabbing sense-lessly at Krater with their weapons,

Some of the watching Talented that had come from beyond the gorge now opened up with their powers to break down Lelar’s shield.

It flickered.

The faint aurora disappeared.

Krater leapt.

*He twisted a spear from the nearest mambat, turned and drove the point into Lelar's chest.
But as Krater had healed his glass-slashed face, so Lelar healed his wounded chest as fast as
the spear could rip.*

*Lelar's talents came quickly to his rescue, breaking down Krater's shield so that both men
were now un-guarded.*

*Krater's people drew their power away from Le-lar and helped their leader form a new shield.
But when this was done, it was obvious that Lelar and his Talented had done the same.*

Both men stood shielded, facing each other.

The moon shone above.

"Get out!" Lelar roared. "The pack of you get—"

Suddenly the dream was gone.

But something remained.

Jake shook his head, trying to think what.

It was the manbats. They had been in the dream, and now they were here in reality!

Cheryn screamed.

There was a flutter of wings.

Jake rose, his stomach suddenly oily and queasy. He was shaking all over, and a cold sweat had broken out down his back and across his forehead. There were three manbats—all with the legbands of Lelar—al-ready on the ground, and an unknown number flapped noisily overhead in the darkness. He scrambled about, found his knapsack, and withdrew the knife that Kell had given him, the knife that had served him so well in his first meeting with the leathery killers. But before he could act on a single one of them, Cheryn had burned them in ball's of spitting green flame tongued through with orange. The manbats were gone. More were coming.

Six others came out of the night sky, and drifting among them was a withered old woman in black leather and burlap drapings, the orange crest of Lelar across her robe.

"A hag!" Cheryn shouted. "An experienced witch!"

"Burn them!" I called to her.

"I can't!" she shouted. "She is draining my powers . . . draining . . . them . . . until . . ."

He crossed the distance between him and the Crim-son Witch, brought his knife around on the neck of the first manbat that had just reached the girl. Blood foun-tained, and the beast went down kicking, snarling, its yellow fangs dripping saliva. "What is she doing?" he asked.

"She knows more than . . . I . . . know. Her power . . . is greater."

"What can I—"

"She means to capture me."

"I won't let her."

"You . . . cannot . . . stop her. Here . . . take this . . . to use . . . on . . . Thobs . . . You . . . will . . . need . . . it . . ."

"What will she do with you?"

"Take me . . . to Lelar."

"The Castle?"

"Yes."

Another bat swooped in on him by surprise, raked claws up his back.

It erupted in flames and was gone.

"I thought—" he began.

"I didn't," Cheryn assured him. "The hag . . . did."

"But why?"

"Here!" Cheryn insisted.

A sword had appeared before him, a Thob sword, long and pointed. "You need not slash much . . . with . . . it," Cheryn cautioned him. "The . . . ma-gic . . . in it . . . will kill your enemy . . . upon touching

his blood . . .”

He grasped the sword.

Another manbat swooped in.

He stabbed it with an overhand thrust, caught it lightly along its ribs. The blow should not have been fatal, but the beast puffed into ashes and was gone.

“The hag,” he said, waving the sword. “I can kill her with this!”

“No. She is . . . too strong.”

Cheryn suddenly lifted from the ground and was drifting up into the darkness. Jake jumped, tried to grab her slim ankles but could not. Then, as he watched her go, the voice of the hag, withered and beaten slithered in his mind, shaped in his brain with-out sound: *Go to see Mordath. He hates Lelar as do I.*

“What is this?” he shouted to the witch.

Mordoth. In the Great Tree.

“Wait!”

But they were gone, the manbats, the hag, Cheryn. Only darkness waited overhead. He was alone with the dragon and the night . . .

Chapter Eleven: MORDOTH

? They set out that night, searching in the forest for the road that Cheryn had mentioned earlier. Jake's thoughts were on the girl, recalling the form of her body and the shape of her mind. Both were delight-ful. He was very much concerned for her. Had she not mentioned, in recalling her meeting with Lelar, that the king had torture chambers below his castle? Would he use them now as he had used them those years before? Would he use them on a Talented? And how could he make a Talented hurt?

Then he thought of the hag that had come with the manbats, the hag that had sealed off Cheryn's powers and had captured her. Apparently, Lelar was a great enough sorcerer that he could cause pain in other Tal-enteds, for how else could he have gained the services of the hag who had bluntly stated she hated the king? Or was that a ruse, too? Were they sending him to Mordoth so that Mordoth could work some other evil on behalf of Lelar? No. No, had they wanted to bring him to bad times, the hag and the manbats could have seen to it easily enough. The hag, in fact, had killed the manbat that had attacked him. Perhaps the old witch was sincere, was working for Lelar against her will, was giving Jake a good clue by telling him to look for Mordoth in the Great Tree.

They marched a forced march until sleep was a thing they could no longer deny. If they wished to be in top form when they met with Mordoth, they would have to sleep now. Jake found a place off the main road where the trees and vines conspired to conceal an easy-access clearing. When the dragon had entered after him, the clearing was filled to capacity. But there was warm grass and soft earth, and they fell asleep almost immediately.

In the morning, they slept through the rising of the sun and the first early call of the birds of the forest. When they woke, the sun was approaching its zenith, perhaps only an hour away. With Kaliglia's aid, Jake foraged the bushes and weeds for berries and nuts. He found an apple tree and discovered the fruit was much the same in this worldline as it had been in his own. He ate his fill of the tangy globes and packed a dozen into his depleted knapsack.

"Which way?" Kaliglia asked as they returned to the hard-packed earthen roadway.

"Deeper into Lelar," Jake said. "There will not likely be any big towns between us and the gorge."

They set off down the tree-hung road, Jake walk-ing to unstiffen his sleep-cramped legs. Later, he rode the dragon until they reached a hamlet of perhaps five hundred people. There were approximately two hundred buildings, all stretched along the length of the highway. There were no secondary streets. The road, however, had been made for horses, not dragons, and Kaliglia nearly filled it to overflowing.

Jake dismounted before what appeared to be a public tavern. It was a two-story stone building with six shuttered windows facing the street like cataracted eyes. The doorway was unblocked, and flies buzzed around the entranceway. Above the door was a sign that said THE GOLDEN CUP in hand-painted letters. Dust coated it thickly, almost blotting out the H in "the" and the LDE in "golden," but the place had the look of a well-used establishment. The ground was beat into paths from several directions to the door. "Wait here," he told the dragon. "I'll see if I can find anything out about Mordoth and the Great Tree."

"I won't move," Kaliglia said.

Jake entered the pub, his Thob sword banging against his thigh where he had it rammed through his belt in a makeshift sheath. The main room was octa-gon shaped, though the exterior of the place did not show this, Jake thought that, in those places where space appeared to be wasted by not having the interior conform to exterior, there would be private rooms where gambling and sexual tete-a-tetes could be held in discretion. This main room, however, was not secretive in any way. It was open and full of

ran-domly scattered tables, most empty at this hour. Against the back wall was the bar, and behind that were kegs and barrels, bottles and crocks on a shelf that ran the entire length of the establishment.

The two patrons and bartender looked up as he came in.

The tapkeeper, behind the bar, was a burly man in rolled shirtsleeves and a colorful yellow and orange gypsy headband. He was washing out a row of mugs and drying them, setting the cleaned pieces on the shelf with the kegs and bottles. All three men turned to stare at Jake as he crossed the room, the Thob sword still banging against his thigh.

“What can I do for you?” the bartender asked, stop-ping his dishwashing.

“I’m in need of a little information.”

One of the two patrons raised his eyebrows know-ingly, as if all who asked for information of a pub-keeper were either miserably poor or up to no good whatsoever.

“What’s that?” the burly pubkeeper asked.

“I’m looking for the Great Tree.”

“And Mordoth?” the bartender asked.

“Yes.”

The three men turned to stare openly at him.

“What do you want with him?” one of the patrons asked, a skinny man with a bushy yellow mustache.

“I believe that’s my business,” Jake said.

The mustached man stood and took a step toward him, the second patron standing behind. Jake touched his hand to the hilt of the Thob sword, and both men froze.

“Calm down now,” the bartender said, picking up a glass and polishing it in an attempt to look noncha-lant.

“I am calm,” Jake said. “It’s these two that want trouble.”

“Luke, Fed, sit down,” the bartender said.

The two men hesitated but finally sat. They looked ready to pounce.

“Now what did I say wrong?” Jake asked, still let-ting his hand play over the sword hilt.

“Look,” the bartender said, leaning over the counter, resting elbows and thick arms on the polished wood surface, “Mordoth is important to us. You understand. He heals the sick people in town. We haven’t had a death from sickness since he’s been here. It’s old age and accidents that claim us now. For the farmers out on the edge of town, he makes the crops grow. We’d be very upset if anything happened to Mordoth. And now you come in with a sword—a Thob sword yet—swinging at your side, asking questions. Maybe if you explained yourself—”

“I—I need help to retrieve a prisoner.”

“What?”

“King Lelar has taken a young witch prisoner, and I mean to take her back. I was told Mordoth would help me.”

“You were told?” the bartender said.

“Yes.”

“By whom?”

“Yeah,” the man with the yellow mustache snapped. “By whom?”

“I don’t see where that is any of your business. I mean Mordoth no harm, and I—”

Thunk! A dagger sunk into the table next to where Jake was standing, quivered in the wood and hummed like a tuning fork. He looked up, his stomach suddenly flopping over and over like a fish out of water. The bartender had put down his rags and had withdrawn a set of knives from under the counter. He held an-other dagger in his hand, weighted in his palm and ready to throw. “I can get you,” he said matter-of-factly, “before you have that sword drawn.”

He took his hand away from his hilt and held both arms out to his side to show that he did not intend to argue. He was perspiring, and it wasn’t particularly that hot. “What do you want?”

“Just to know who told you to come to Mordoth,” the mustached man said.

He hesitated. If they knew that a Talented in the employ of King Lelar had sent him, what would be

their reaction? They were trying to protect Mor-doth, after all. Wouldn't that other dagger come light-ning quick across the counter and bury itself up to the hilt in his chest?

"Who?" the bartender demanded, swinging his hand as if ready to toss the glittering knife.

Truth, he decided quickly, was the best path. "A witch, my wife," one small untruth, "was kidnapped by an old hag and a squad of manbats. But before the hag left with her, she told me that she hated King Lelar and that she was serving him because he would kill her if she did not. She told me that Mordoth could help me to get my woman back. That is all I know."

The three men exchanged glances. The bartender nodded and put the dagger down.

Jake sighed and collapsed into a chair.

"We know the hag," the bartender said. "Sad story. She was such an independent old bitch until Lilar got to working on her with his evil magics. But that's the story with all the Talented in this kingdom. Subservient to the last."

"But Mordoth—" Jake began.

"Mordoth, too." The mustached man shook his head sadly, picked up his mug and downed a huge swallow of brew.

"Then how can he help me?" Jake asked, suddenly exasperated.

"He can't storm the walls of Castle Lelar for you," the bartender said. "But maybe there is some little thing he can do, something relatively inconspicuous, something Lelar would not notice. The hag must have had something in mind."

"You'll help me find him."

"Here," the bartender said, indicating the gate in the bar. "Come back here."

He stood and crossed to the gate. The bartender swung it inward for him, and he went behind the long bar. The bartender walked to the end where the win-dow broke the wall. "Look here." He thrust a finger at the glass.

Jake came to the window and looked out. Be-yond a forest sprawled over the land, green and thick with gnarled trees that were hung with ropy yellow vines. "The Great Tree is in there?"

The bartender laughed. So did the other two. "That is the Great Tree," the mustached one said.

"The whole forest?"

"You got it."

"All those trunks are just branches of the main tree whose trunk is roughly in the middle of all that. The branches dip into the ground and become roots for awhile, then jump back out as big and healthy as when they went in. You ought to see it in winter when the leaves are gone. Sure is a scary, eerie sight."

"How do I find Mordoth in all that?" Jake asked.

"Mordoth will find you. Just ride into the forest, ride into the tree and he will come to you."

"Then I best be going. There isn't any time to waste."

"Not if Lelar has your witch already," the bar-tender said. He escorted Jake back through the gate and to the door of the bar. "We've decided to trust you, stranger," he said menacingly. "But if anything should happen to Mordoth, if you should be sent by some Power to do him harm, then your life will be worthless in these parts. We would find and kill you."

"Don't worry," Jake said. "I need Mordoth as much as you do. I will leave him as well as I found him. That I guarantee."

He mounted Kaliglia and rode him out of town to-ward the tangle of branches and leaves that was the Great Tree. As they went, he told Kaliglia what had transpired in the bar, explained the Great Tree when the dragon showed suspicion that they were being hoodwinked.

They crossed the grassy plain surrounding the tree and found themselves at the huge growth's perimeter without a pathway large enough for the dragon. They scouted the edge for a time, then stopped, tired of looking and pessimistic about finding a way even if they continued the search.

"So I get left behind again, huh?" the dragon grumbled.

"Looks that way." Jake slid off the giant back and bounced on his heels on the earth. He checked the Thob sword, for he kept expecting it to vanish, but it was intact. "I'll be back when I have enlisted Mordoth's aid. That should be before dark."

"I'll eat," Kaliglia said, chomping off a cluster of leaves from the Great Tree and munching on them. "Nothing much else to do."

Jake stepped into the comparative darkness under the trees, waved a quick goodbye, and slipped along the mammoth branches, pushing his way through denser configurations of leaves and vines, his hand near the hilt of his sword, his eyes open for the appearance of Mordoth which the bartender had very nearly guaranteed.

They brought the witch before him and bound her to the stake in the center of the throne room. He got out of his ornate throne, his white robes in a swirl, the orange crescent rippling across his breast, and approached her, smiling. "Ah, the Witch of Eye Mountain," he said, rubbing his thin hands together, clicking his dirty nails like a lizard might click its claws. "I knew your mother quite well in the old days."

Cheryn spat on the floor at the old man's feet.

He laughed. "You are a prideful one, aren't you?"

She spat again.

He laughed louder than before and rubbed his hands together energetically. "Yes, I remember now. Your mother was the same way. Ah, I wonder if I could ever have tamed her? She was such a witch!"

"What do you want of me?" Cheryn hissed, wasting no time in pleasantries.

"And so pretty," Lelar said, ignoring her question. He cupped her head in his hand and lifted her face to his. She tried to jerk free, but he held her rightly. "More beautiful than your mother, even."

"What do you want?" Each word was hard and brittle enough to crack.

"I wonder if the rest of you—" He waved a hand, and her clothes were gone.

She screamed.

"Magnificent!" he said.

The two manbats standing guard by the gold-leafed door snickered and nudged each other knowingly.

Suddenly, the king was also naked. One moment he was dressed in the richest finery one might imagine, the next his skinny legs and swollen belly were there to be viewed.

"You're a mess yourself," Cheryn said and laughed.

He yelped and quickly attired himself again, using his own magics to create golden robes trimmed in black velvet and studded about the collar with semi-precious green and amber stones. Then he turned on her and frowned. "I should have put a hand over your magics earlier. I was careless."

"You were funny," she said. "But if you've had your thrill, would you mind clothing me again. I'm cold, and since you've clamped my Talent, I can't manage to stir up something myself."

He frowned, regained his good humor. One moment she was beautifully naked, the next she was clothed in beggar's rags. "That suits," Lelar said, laughing once again.

"Well, it keeps off the draft," Cheryn agreed. "Now, what the hell do you want?"

"What do *I* want?"

"That was the question. And I certainly didn't address those two barbarians you have guarding the door."

"But, my dear," he said gently, sarcastically, "was it not you who invaded my kingdom? Was it not you who killed a detail of my manbats? Was it not, indeed, you who destroyed one of my best Talented with your magics?"

"And what were your lousy manbats doing that close to the gorge?"

He smiled. "I don't have to answer that. It is I who is asking the questions here. But because I want to see your reaction, I'll tell you what they were doing that near the gorge." He smiled again, licked his lips and paced off toward the throne. He whirled and faced her again. "Scouting!"

"What for?"

"For places to fortify. You see, I plan to take the land beyond the gorge. Then my kingdom will stretch from sea to sea."

"You'll be defeated!"

“No. Once I would have been, yes. Once, the superior forces of the Talented on your shore would have overwhelmed me. But not so any longer. I have commanded all the Talented on this side to obey me, and they do so out of great fear. They know what would happen to them if they disagreed or refused to obey. With them at my back and with my vast squads of manbats ready to die for me, I have the power to take both sides of the gorge. And I will. Very shortly.”

“I’ll warn them!”

He laughed. “You must get away first. And that you will not do.”

“We’ll see.”

“Yes, your mother’s spirit. But it will do you no good here. Now, suppose you answer my question. What are you doing here?”

She remained silent.

“What!”

“I won’t say.”

He circled her, came back to her face. “If you are expecting your friend and his beast to come to your rescue, forget it my dear. The hag should have killed them. I have punished her for the oversight. And tonight another squad of manbats *will* kill them. They will not have your magics to save them this time, nor will they have the intervention of the hag. Now, please tell me what you are doing here and tell me quickly, lest I get angry. You have not seen me angry.”

She spat again.

He squinted, brought his Talent to bear on her.

She screamed and collapsed to the floor, her arms still bound to the stake.

He released her mind. “What are you doing in Lelar?”

“I can’t tell you,” she hissed, thinking of the new world beyond the portal in the wall that even now shimmered opaquely next to her, thinking of the virgin territory where Lelar would advance once he had conquered both sides of the gorge. He must be denied that new land!

He brought his powers to bear again.

She passed out.

When she came to again moments later, prodded to consciousness by Lelar’s Talents, he bent over her and patted her shoulder. “Now, this is not what we want, is it? I don’t want to bleed that magnificent spirit. I have use for it. You will make an excellent lover.”

“No,” she moaned, twisting at the stake.

Lelar cackled. The manbats cackled, too. “Oh, but you will. And I can make you. So, you see, I don’t want to drain you, to wrinkle you and make you old. I want you as perfect as you are now. But I will still know what it is that brought you here. And I know how to make you tell.”

“I won’t!”

“We’ll see. I’ll ask you again tonight—after you have spent an hour or so in my private chambers.”

“I —”

“Take her away to the castle matron,” Lelar ordered the two manbats. “I’ll send orders later what is to be done with her.”

The manbats advanced, grinning . . .

He had been walking some time when he came to the portal in the tree. It opened directly before him, and in the gloom he had momentarily mistaken it for the hungry mouth of some slothful, mammoth predator who expected him to walk right between its teeth. But a closer inspection had revealed a doorway into the branch. He poked his head through and saw a dimly lighted hallway stretching to his left and winding out of sight. He stepped through, and the portal slid shut behind him. Mordoth had found him, just as the men in the tavern had predicted.

Was that good or bad?

Again, he was plagued with doubts. Who knew in what manner the mind of a madman like Lelar worked? Perhaps he *had* been meant to come to Mordoth to meet with his end. No. He shook his head

as if that would send the doubt away. It did, a little. He decided that physical exertion would get him thinking healthy thoughts again, and he set off down the corri-dor. Mordoth was his friend. He needed Mordoth. Mordoth was a good Talented, though he might be commanded by Lelar. Hadn't he seen proof that the Talented was helpful to Commoners in a time when other Talented thought next to nothing of Common-ers? Well, then he would have to trust the hag and go on. There was Cheryn to think of. He would put his fate in Mordoth's hands. Nevertheless, he kept his right hand on the sword, ready to draw it and fight if forced to.

The corridor wound down for a rime until he was certain that the branch had gone underground and had become a yards-thick root. The walls were dewy, which supported his assumption, and here and there various small, wormlike organisms clustered on the walls. After some minutes, the walls became dry as the path slanted up. Ahead, he could see light where the corridor emptied into a room of some sort. He stepped up his pace and came to the end of the tun-nel. The room he had seen lay ahead. Checking his sword one last time, he walked forward into the light.

It was fascinating. The room stretched across for a hundred feet, the walls all polished wood, the ceiling and floor joined together by great polished wooden stalagmites and stalagites. The light was magiced light, for there was no evident source. It seemed to issue from the wood itself, though a concentrated gaze on any one spot showed only dark, highly polished wood no different than any other finished grain. Anyway, as impressive as the chamber was, it did not hold the object of his search. Mordoth was nowhere in sight. He crossed the shiny floor to a flight of steps carved in the opposite wall, mounted them. Along the entire length of the staircase, the wall was carved with scenes of paradise and hell. There were naked maidens engaged in love with virile, muscular, handsome young men, all postures and all acts included. But spaced between these were scenes of devils torturing equally beautiful people, devils with hunched backs and gnarled, angry faces. The work was intricate and flawless. At the top of the staircase, he moved through a verticle passageway with rungs carved from the walls and came out of a manhole into another room, much smaller than the grand chamber below, but also more intimate and somehow more beautiful. The ceiling sloped in all directions, blending in with the walls and floor so that the distinctions of partitions seemed to vanish, and Jake felt almost as if he were within a ball that had been hollowed into living quarters. The walls here were carved, too, but in wild, freeform lines and patterns that told the eye nothing, that performed no artistic function for the viewer outside of the fact that it relaxed his eye and helped him become accustomed to the dim lighting.

"Sit down," a voice said out of the gloom. "Make yourself comfortable."

He jumped, turned, hunting the voice. He found the source. A dwarf sat in one corner of the room amidst a scattering of lush pillows. There was a bottle of wine before him and two glasses. "Who—" Jake began.

"Mordoth," the dwarf said. "When someone enters the tangles of the Great Tree, I imagine they come looking for me. You have, have you not?"

"I have."

"Then come and sit and have some wine while we talk."

He crossed the room. Twice he had to hunch over to get past the sloped roof that would accommodate the dwarf but would not pass him. He thought, as he hunched, what the grand chamber below must be like to this little man. If it seemed a hundred feet across to Jake, it would seem two hundred to Mordoth. He reached the pillows and sat across from the dwarf, accepted a glass of the darkly gleaming liquid and sipped it. It was quite pleasant, sweet and tangy at once. It gave off fumes that tickled his nose and made his mouth water.

"This is some place," Jake said, feeling a necessity for polite chatter before getting down to requests.

"I hollowed out the passages and the room with my magics. I always think a man's house should be as grand as he can manage. This is the best I have been able to accomplish to date, though I plan a lot more work on it."

Jake sipped more of the wine.

"You want something of me?" Mordoth asked, breaking the ice.

"Yes."

"If it is within my powers, I'll grant it."

"My wife has been kidnapped. I want her back."

"Who was your wife?"

"Cheryn, the Witch of Eye Mountain."

"The Crimson Witch!" Mordoth said, surprised.

"That's her."

"I can hardly believe—"

"It is true."

"Married, you say."

"We were going to be."

"And you are not a Talented!"

"Does that make me naturally inferior as an in-dividual?" Jake snapped, suddenly bristling. Maybe it had been a mistake to come here. Maybe he should have tried it on his own.

"No, no," Mordoth said. "Excuse me if I sound racist. I was just surprised. I knew of no Talented that could tame her. I am surprised you could, my boy. Why, it's a wonder she didn't ask you when you made your first advance."

"She couldn't."

"Eh?"

"Talented cannot affect me negatively. They can only do good for me. The Sorceress Kell gave me that protection."

"I see. And congratulations for winning such a fair woman!"

"But she's been kidnapped, you see. If I don't re-cover her, she won't ever marry me."

"But who could have kidnapped Cheryn. Her own magics are powerful enough to protect her. Surely—"

"It was King Lelar. More exactly, it was a hag he sent to do his dirty work."

Mordoth nodded wisely. "I know the hag."

"It was the hag that told me to come to you."

"Yes. Yes, of course. She works for Lelar but grudgingly. I knew he would get her, yet I knew he would never fully tame her."

Jake fidgeted on the pillows and finished his wine, not wanting to interrupt Mordoth as the dwarf sat cross-legged, his eyes closed and his brow knitted as if he were thinking. He poured himself another glass of wine without asking and sipped at it. Finally, he could contain himself no longer. "Will you help me?"

"I—"

"I know you work for Lelar, too. I had hoped you were somewhat independent like the hag."

Mordoth laughed, but it was not an entirely happy laugh. "I am. And I will try to help you. I cannot lead you to the castle and assure you victory, for Lelar has too great a hold on me for that. But I might be able to . . ." His voice trailed off.

"Yes?"

"To tell you what the future holds for you."

"But how will that help if the future holds death and heartache?"

"Well," Mordoth said, grinning and drinking a glassful of wine in one gulp, "I just looked ahead a moment ago, and I saw something that might be of great help to you."

"What's that?"

"Tonight, after you have camped, a squad of man-bats will come to kill you and your dragon friend."

Jake almost jumped up, remembered the low ceiling and restrained himself. "But what good does knowing that do me? If they are successful, it hardly matters whether I know or not. Are they successful?"

"That depends."

"On what?"

Mordoth poured himself more wine and fingered the finely carved glass that held it. "On whether or

not you prepare for them. If you are unprepared, they will kill you. If you are ready for them, their chances are not nearly so great.”

“Prepared for them?”

“Well,” Mordoth said, shrugging his tiny shoulders and tilting his overlarge head to one side, “you know about their coming now. Should you choose to prepare for them—set traps, shall we say—you could easily overpower them and save your life.”

“I see what you mean. And I thank you. I would have died without the warning.”

“You may still die. I cannot always help you. I do not see all of the future, only moments of it.”

“What else can you see?”

“Cheryn is safe in the castle.”

“But doesn't Lelar torture her?”

“No. He has something more sinister in mind.”

“What?”

“You won't like it.”

“Tell me anyway.”

“He means to take her as his mistress.”

“As Queen?”

“No, just as a private lover.”

This time he did jump up, and he did crack his head on the low ceiling. Cursing, he sat down, rubbing his head and pounded his free fist into a pillow. “He can't do that! I'll kill him!”

“If only you could,” Mordoth said wishfully. He was evidently thinking of the tortures and pain he had experienced at the hands of the mad king, and it was obvious that he would joyfully welcome the old Tal-ented's demise.

“You must do something!” Jake pleaded.

“I cannot move against him,” Mordoth said sadly. “And I doubt that you can. Though, if he can't harm you, you have one thing working to your advantage. You must simply avoid the manbats.”

“You can save me more time on my quest,” Jake said.

“What would you know?”

“Where in the castle will I find her?”

Mordoth frowned, started to answer, then sud-denly stopped short. “King Lelar!” he whispered urgently. Then his mouth fell open like a gate, and his eyes glazed.

“YOU HAVE BETRAYED ME, MORDOTH!” a booming voice said in the room. But the voice came out of Mordoth's throat—and it was not Mordoth's voice.

The dwarf's face reddened. His hands came up and clutched frantically at his head. He tried to scream, but Lelar held control of his vocal cords through long distance magics. The skin around Mordoth's lips and nostrils began to blacken. His eyes went abruptly bloodshot, and the whites began to turn brown. He was like a fuse slowly burning out. The blackness spread from his nostrils and covered his entire face until he was a figure of ash. His eyeballs flamed, leav-ing his sockets empty. Mordoth was surely dead.

Still, the voice came from his cracked and bleeding lips. “AND NOW YOU, MY FRIEND.”

Fire burst all around Jake, but none of it touched him. The floors and walls of the room began smoulder-ing.

“DIE, DAMN YOU!” Lelar's voice boomed.

The walls caught and leapt into flame. The floor followed their example. Jake turned and found the manhole, started down it quickly, coughing on the thick smoke.

The ruined dwarf figure of Mordoth, though phys-ically dead, followed him, powered by Lelar's magics. It started down the rungs, pale hands gripping, bare, pale feet stepping from rung to rung.

He reached the steps beside the carved walls and took them two at a time into the enormous ballroom where the stalactites and stalagmites carried the flame from the room above. Lelar as Mordoth followed, hurling bolts of lightning and fire after him. But they bounced off his back without igniting him, setting the Great Tree on fire instead. He crossed the ballroom at a dead run, the struggling corpse

slithering and scraping after him.

“STOP!” Lelar shouted. “TLL CONDEMN YOU TO DAMNATION!”

But that was a power even beyond Lelar.

Jake found the mouth of the tunnel through which he had entered and started down the corridor. The dwarf appeared in the entrance behind him. Mordoth's clothes were afire, and his hands were alive with tiny flames. He took a step forward, trying to continue, but the body was hopelessly ruined. It collapsed. The only thing Lelar could use of it was its vocal cords, and those he used without mercy, calling after the disappearing figure with the long hair and the walnut shell necklace.

“TLL CONDEMN YOU TO DAMNATION.” “TLL CONDEMN YOU TO DAMNATION.”
“TLL CONDEMN YOU TO DAMNA-TION . . .”

Chapter Twelve: MANBATS AT MIDNIGHT

? They had left the Great Tree with haste, for once the townspeople saw the smoke and realized the fan-tastic growth was going up in flames, his life would be worthless. When the bartender found that Mordoth was dead, when he saw the corpse or the smoke-yellowed bones of the dwarf, he would spread Jake's description through the immediate territory, and he would most likely be killed on sight or, worse, bound, gagged, and tortured until he died. They would not be easy on the man who killed their patron saint. It would be useless trying to explain that Lelar had killed the Talented. These people would want blood, and not being able to get Lelar's, they would take Jake's as a useable substitute.

But there was also the manbats to worry about. Mordoth had said they would attack this night, which meant he and Kaliglia must find a decent place to camp, one that was defensible. They found it, several hours later, tucked in the edge of the woods. There was a high stone cliff at the end of a blind pathway with trees on the other two sides of it. Near the cliff, the trees arched and met overhead, blocking out perpendicular descent by the manbats. They could come in to the clearing only one way—straight on. They stopped here and set about building the defenses Jake had in mind . . .

Jake had built a roaring fire after all else was done, and he stacked logs and leaves and dried vines next to it to feed it with. The manbats would find him no matter how hard he tried to conceal his whereabouts, so there was little sense in doing without a fire. Besides, the manbats could see well at night, and he could not. The fire enabled him to see clearly the area of the immediate campsite while being bright enough to worry the eyes of the manbats.

He lay beside Kaliglia, back against the cliff, as if he were asleep, though his eyes were slightly open and his breathing was much too heavy and excited to be that of a sleeping man. They had finished the defenses long after dark, and he had been constantly worried that the flap of wings would sound before things had been finished, that he would feel the rake of sharp claws down his back and die with his miserable weapons system incomplete, a thing for the man-bats to ponder over and laugh at, a thing left to rot in the woods—with his corpse. But they had finished after all and now had only to wait. His watch told him it was midnight when they heard the rustle of leathery wings and the hissed calls of the demon beasts as they circled overhead, looking for a way through the trees.

Kaliglia pushed to his feet and tensed, ready to leap up and sideways when Jake gave the order.

Jake tensed, put his hand on the trigger string of his device he had spent all of the afternoon and evening preparing, placed his other hand on his Thob sword.

The manbats alighted beyond the trees and came through the opening just as he planned. There were nine of them that he could see, but they had most likely come in a detail of a dozen. The missing trio would be drifting about overhead, waiting as back-up forces in the event the nine decided they needed help, or as scouts to flee if the nine decided they could not overcome their opposition. But they would be very confident. His young witch was gone and could no longer help him, could no longer fry his opponents in the air, turn them into ash before they touched claw to him. And the hag was not there either; she could not deter them from tearing him into small, bloody pieces. Yes, they would be very confident indeed. They would come rushing in without fear. And that was just what he wanted them to do.

They started walking toward the fire, squinting, hunched and scuttling, their razor claws rattling against the slate and gravel that strewn the ground there. They hissed back and forth, exchanging

view-points, issuing suggestions and orders, splitting into two groups that clung to opposite sides of the narrow pathway. But that would do them little or no good.

Jake pulled lightly on the rope made of fine fibers, felt it go taut. That was ready. He just had to give it a stiff, sudden jerk, and . . .

The manbats cautiously entered the cavern formed by the interlocking tops of the trees. They were no more than forty feet away, their black-black eyes gleaming with reflected flecks of the blazing campfire. He fancied he could almost smell their stinking breath, almost feel their cold skin against his, their sharp claws drawing his blood. But he shook his head and con-centrated on the plan . . .

They were in the target area.

He waited another few seconds.

They advanced a few more steps.

He pulled the rope, leaping to his feet and drawing his Thob sword at the same moment. He had made his play now. If his device failed, it was certainly the end for him, certainly the end for Cheryn, too.

The manbats cried out when they saw him, stopped their advance and hissed to one another, trying to de-cide what to do next, whether to advance recklessly in a single group, relying on their superior numbers to overpower him before he could kill many of them, or to stalk him and worry him until he opened himself for a death blow, as he surely would if they tired him enough.

Kaliglia bumbled erect, his long neck swinging to and fro.

And then the rocks fell.

It had only been a split second since he had tugged the rope and jumped to his feet, but the second had somehow become involved in a time warp, and it seemed as if minutes had passed instead. For a moment, he had been afraid that his device had failed and that death was the only logical end to this little confronta-tion. But that was not to be so.

He had spent all afternoon and evening construct-ing a net of vines and slinging it above, between the arched trees that shielded the trail, rigging a trigger rope that collapsed the net when jerked abruptly. Then he had searched about through the woods and adjoin-ing clearings and had collected over two hundred stones which he distributed evenly in the net so that no matter where one stood on the pathway below, the stones were bound to strike him. Now the net col-lapsed as it was meant to, and the stones fell, bouncing off the heads and shoulders of the manbats. All nine went down under the heavy hail, screaming in fright . . .

Jake leaped around the fire and came upon them after the stones had stopped falling. All of them were down and bleeding, but not all of them were dead. To his left, one of the demons groaned, hissed, and wob-bled erect, holding its head in its clawed, bony hands. He ran forward and thrust the blade of the Thob sword deep into the beast's chest, twisting it as he did so. The manbat shrieked, gurgled, dribbled blood through his thin lips, and toppled backwards onto the ground. Jake drew the sword out of the demon and whirled to the others. Four of them were obviously dead, their heads split by the avalanche. But another four were only groggy and would be standing and calling for help shortly. He moved among them, ram-ming the sword into them and finishing them off be-fore they could be a greater menace to him. But the last shrieked out a string of what could have been words, and he knew as he plunged the blade through the mutant's neck that it had summoned the three above. He hoped there were only three . . .

Kaliglia had moved to his prearranged spot while Jake had finished off the manbats felled by the stones, and now they were prepared with their second bit of strategy. Kaliglia had moved through the woods to a spot farther down the trail. If the other three man-bats landed, they would be trapped between the Thob sword and the angry dragon, not a particularly pleas-ant or healthful position.

There was a screeching and a fluttering, and the three alighted on the trail, eyes blazing with an impos-sible black hue that was fractured with yellow as the flames reflected in the pitch orbs. They hurried for-ward, screeching angrily and waving their clawed hands about. Jake raised the sword as they came in under the canopy of trees and signaled Kaliglia to make his move . . .

The dragon could be surprisingly quiet when he wanted to be. He moved out of the forest onto the trail behind the manbats, and they appeared not to have heard a thing.

Jake backed toward the fire and the cliff, hoping to gain time until Kaliglia was in position to move.

The manbats came on, clattering . . .

Hissing . . .

Yellowed fangs wet with saliva, almost glowing in the firelight . . .

Then Kaliglia moved. He swung his huge head around, mouth open, and collided with the three man-bats, knocking the trio off their feet. His jaws closed over one of the creatures, and his square, blunt, veg-etarian's teeth crushed the frail body. He spat it out and repeated the maneuver on a second of the demons,

But the third was up and running toward Jake. It flapped wings, leaped into the air and came down at him, claws extended. He thrust the Thob sword above his head and speared the thing through one of its legs. It yelped, pulled back, and flapped in a circle, dropped again like one of the stones out of the net. He didn't have time to bring up the sword again, and it sprawled him onto the ground, rolled over and beyond him, into the fire. It screamed, rushed back out . . .

And Kaliglia settled his jaws onto its squirming form, crushing it and spitting it back into the fire.

Then there was silence. All twelve of the enemy were dead.

Chapter Thirteen: LELAR'S CASTLE

? After they had dragged the bodies of the manbats into the brush and concealed them from sight of later patrols, Jake and Kaliglia decided, being exuberant from the success of their fight and quite some distance from the unreal land of sleep, to go on in the darkness and reach the Castle Lelar before morning, hiding out nearby so that when further squads of manbats were sent to search for them, they would not so easily be discovered. The king would hardly expect them to have survived the first attack, let alone survived it *and* marched all night to the castle. So they set forth, Jake upon the giant's back, lumbering along the main trail in the darkest hours of the morning.

The castle was magnificent. They moved off the trail into the edge of the woods and stared at it for a time, taking in the tremendous walls that thrust two hundred feet into the dawn. The walls were of polished green-black stone and seemed not to be chipped, cracked, or weathered in any way, smooth and flawless. The strange rock picked up the yellows and oranges of the morning and reflected them as yellows and greens, shimmering like the wet hide of some alien beast. The windows were long and narrow and barred with extensions of the wall, as if the windows had been whittled from the wall with the bars left in by the careful whittler. Blue light, psi-light, played behind the bars in many of the rooms. The people of the castle woke early, it appeared. The drawbridge was down, a great expanse of gray-brown wood held on brass chains.

Horse-drawn carts driven by well-dressed servants left from the gate and moved down the drawbridge and up the dusty road toward the nearest store to purchase food and cooking wood. The gate was manned by four guards in dapper green and blue uni-forms reminiscent of the outfit of a matador, tight and shiny, rich yet somehow simple.

To the right of the castle was the great stone tower that served as an aviary for the manbats. There was a low chattering from its dark portals. A few manbats swept in and out as the minutes ticked past, zooming toward the thick walls, breaking with controlled flaps of their wings, and settling through the round, un-covered windows that punctuated the walls all around and at all heights.

"Nothing to do but sleep," Jake said. "When dark-ness comes, we can go in the castle. But we have to wait till then."

"I'm tired anyway," Kaliglia agreed.

Sleep came swiftly . . .

When they woke, the sun had set and they were hungry. But there was no time to be wasted getting food. Kaliglia could munch on anything handy as long as he did not cause too much noise with his chewing. Jake would go hungry—except for some of the green apples in his pack. The important thing was to get in-side the castle, find Cheryn, and get through the por-tal, back into his own worldline. He could eat once all that was done.

"Keep your sense of direction," Kaliglia warned. "You'll need it when Cheryn has to blast a pathway into the castle for me. She'll want to knock out the right wall on the first try. It might get rather awkward if she had to blow out several before she got the right one."

"I'll remember."

"What do you plan to do to get in?"

Jake looked over the castle with its great ramparts, huge towers, glistening walls, impregnable windows. "I'll have to go in through the front door. The stone bars on the windows rule out anything

else.”

“The guards—”

Jake shrugged. “I’ll worry about them when I get there.” He hunched at the edge of the woods, took a deep breath, and darted across the open space toward the first copse of brush. He skidded into that on his belly and lay breathing heavily, waiting for the guards to shout, waiting for the first lance to penetrate the brush and run him through. But seconds went by, then minutes, and he knew that he was safe—so far.

He looked over his shoulder. He could just barely see Kaliglia's face. The brute was stretched out on the forest floor and had shoved his snout to within inches of the dark perimeter of the wood. His eyes caught a sliver of the castle psi-light as he watched his human comrade advance.

Jake looked back to the castle and studied the situation. There were two guards at the castle door, the inner edge of the drawbridge. During the daylight hours, there had been two others at the outer limits of the bridge, one stationed to each side with pennant and lance, standing at attention. But these had merely been for pomp, to impress visitors, and they had been removed with the coming of night. It was a half-hearted defense. Lelar had no fear for his privacy. Who would dare to violate the castle of the mightiest Tal-ented in the world? No one, certainly. Except Jake. And they would think he was dead—or had turned tail and run to avoid the vicious manbats sent after him. The two guards talked and joked, and their laughter carried across the moat to where he lay in the copse. It might be possible to catch them unawares with his Thob sword. The big problem now was getting to them without being seen.

The drawbridge was to the left of the copse, a good two hundred feet of comparatively barren land. Even if he could run it noiselessly, they were sure to spot the movement and pick him off before he got close enough to swing the Thob blade. To his right was a shallow stream that spilled down steps and fed the moat before draining out in a similar spillway on the other side. If he could get to the stream and crouch in the bed, perhaps he could reach the moat and cling to its banks where the shadows of the castle and the black water would conceal his movements.

The guards laughed again. One produced a bottle, and they shared a drink of wine. That was all for the better. A little drunk, they would be easier to handle.

He tensed, clutched his sword in his right hand, and got to his knees. He worked himself into a crouch. His breath was coming evenly. The first spurt had not drained him of anything. Without further thought, he moved to the right, stumbling once on a rock, and rolled into the stream bed, his heart pounding and his hand gripped achingly tight around the hilt of his weapon. It seemed impossible that the two guards had not heard him when he tripped over the rock, but they still laughed and shared the bottle. It was going to be easy. He could see that much.

He waited awhile to regain his composure. It was not going to be possible to run down the stream bed. There were hardly any banks at all; if he crouched, they would see him here almost as easily as if he were crossing open land. The sword held to his side, he began wriggling forward on his stomach as he had seen soldiers do in war movies back in his own worldline. The noise seemed tremendous, like an avalanche as he slid over the stones, the water slapping against him, gurgling loudly. But the guards were a good distance off, and whatever shuffling sounds did reach them would most likely blend in with the normal background noises of the night.

When he came to the spillway where the stream tumbled into the moat, he crawled out onto the moat bank where shadows completely obscured him and took a moment to gather his strength.

Then he came to his feet and ran on his toes, never going back on his heels for fear of making noise, until he came to the edge of the drawbridge where the shadows very suddenly ceased to exist and the light from the courtyard spilled out through the gate, illuminating the night. There was no chance he could conceal himself any longer. He summoned his courage, held the sword before him, and leaped onto the bridge, crossing the last few steps to the guards, and swinging his sword on the nearest. It was as good on real objects as it was on Thobs. It bit into the sentry. The man shuddered, gagged, fell away with blood pouring out of him.

Jake whirled on the second to bring home another fatal blow when, abruptly, a fist caught him on the

jaw and sent him reeling backwards, almost into the moat. He shook his head, swung the sword to deliver a solid blow. The second guard drop-kicked him in the chest, sending him over the edge of the planking into the pitch, cold waters below.

Suffocating . . .

Darkness . . .

He beat his way to the surface and spat out the water that was in his mouth, coughed again and again to clear his lungs. The Thob sword was still in his hand, and he clutched it tightly now as something brushed by him beneath the surface of the moat.

“Bandit!” The guard was shouting from the bridge above. “Bandit! Bandit!”

There were answering shouts from the castle, the slap-slap of feet on the courtyard cobblestones.

Jake turned toward the shore, treading water. But there was something in his way. A long snout and two yellow eyes belied the calm of the water and gave evidence of some rather ugly form like an iceberg beneath the surface.

He brandished his sword.

The beast didn't move. It lay on the water like a log with only the knob of its head showing.

Above, more servants clattered onto the bridge, some with torches. The moat and the surrounding area was brightly lighted now. Jake could see that the beast was some form of alligator.

Someone above said something, and everyone laughed.

The beast began moving in.

Jake backstroked to the wall.

The beast kept coming.

When his shoulderblades touched the castle stone, he knew there was nowhere for him to go. Except down. He clenched the sword and frantically tried to plan his actions in the coming minutes. There was only one thing he might do. It could just possibly work.

He treaded water, waiting.

The beast stopped moving in directly and began a back and forth movement that brought him in more slowly. It was an attempt to hypnotize him, Jake knew. Another animal, less intelligent than a human being, would carefully follow the left-to-right motion until it was somewhat numbed with the repetition. Then, when it was least aware, the beast would zoom in for the kill. He would have to keep himself sharp.

The drawbridge was almost full of spectators now. They elbowed one another for better vantage points.

The beast attacked!

He dived.

The water was so dark that he could see little but shadows. Had it not been for the torchlight above, even shadows would have been imperceptible.

The beast swung around, surprised. It was directly over him now. He rammed the sword upward and gouged out its belly.

It dived after him.

His chest ached for air.

The beast brushed his side, not seeing him, turned abruptly when it realized what it had touched.

He smashed the sword into its snout.

The beast flailed mindlessly now.

Jake surfaced and drew in a great gulp of air.

The crowd on the bridge roared approval when they saw him, and he wondered why. Then something brushed his legs again, and he whirled to see a second of the alligator creatures gliding through the water behind him. The moat, he suddenly realized, was full of them. He could kill one—maybe even two or three, but he could not hold out forever. Sooner or later, and most likely sooner, his arms would get tired from hack-ing with the sword, from keeping him above the water. His legs would grow weary with treading. He would not be able to hold them off. They would circle like buzzards and finally devour him.

The beast darted at him.

He dived again.

But it had been coming in for a bite of its dead com-panion. It dived, too, ripped into the other alligator corpse, and ignored Jake. It would not last for long. Others would be coming, and there would not be enough dead meat for all of them. He turned to rise, jumped as he was confronted with another dark shadow in the murky gloom. He waited for the bite of razor teeth, but the shadow didn't move. He realized, suddenly, that he was beside the wall and that the black mark he was seeing was a hole in it big enough for a man to get through. With the last air in his lungs, he shoved himself inside the castle wall and swam up-ward, seeking desperately for air.

He broke the surface in a dark cellar whose floor was covered with water. There was absolutely no light in here, and he stayed where he was, bobbling, hoping his eyes would adjust sufficiently to allow him to navigate. After five minutes or so, he realized there was just not enough light to see adequately. He would have to feel his way about. Keeping one hand against the slime-covered stones of the wall, he moved along, not quite knowing what he was looking for. When he found it, he knew it was the right thing: stairs.

He kicked onto them and lay breathing heavily, too exhausted to find out, for the moment, where they led. All that mattered was that he had escaped from the moat, from the alligators with the fine, sharp teeth. To the onlookers at the drawbridge, it would appear as if the second beast had gotten him. They would have seen him go down, the beast dive over him, and his failure to reappear. There would be no search parties, for they would expect no remains—let alone a living, breathing man. He was inside the castle, a free agent, just as he had set out to be.

When his breath returned, he got up and followed the stairs upward until he came to a small landing. From there, the steps went in two directions, to the left and right, obviously following the wall of the castle, providing secret passage behind every room in the structure. There was light here, too. At several points in both directions, there were exits from the stairs through the fireplaces that led into other rooms of the castle. Light poured through these fireplaces and dimly illuminated the secret passages.

He chose the stairway to the left, followed it to its end and found no fireplace that gave access to a room where Cheryn might be. He went back to the landing then and moved along the right stairs. At the third point of egress, when he hunkered down to peer around the baffling and through the fireplace grat-ing, he saw her sitting at a vanity, combing her hair . . .

Chapter Fourteen: THE PORTAL BETWEEN THE WORLDS

? He was about to venture forth and announce him-self when the door opened and a woman servant entered the chamber. She closed the door after her and approached Cheryn. She was a fat, middle-aged shrew with thin lips and tiny, beady eyes set on the sides of a beak of a nose. “The King will see you now,” she said to Cheryn.

“Tell him to go to hell!” Cheryn snapped, slamming the comb down on the vanity top.

“Little lady—” the woman began in a condescending manner.

“Go to hell yourself,” Cheryn said.

“When the king chooses a woman,” the servant said, “that woman should be grateful to be of service to him. Now you will come with me and no further dillydallying.”

Jake's ears pricked, and his face grew red. So Lelar had seen the beauty, had appreciated the form of this girl and had immediately set out to conquer her. He would pay for that some day. Jake wriggled around the baffling and into the fireplace. The servant woman had her back to him, her hands on her hips as she regarded Cheryn.

“If you think so mighty much of the king,” Cheryn hissed, “why don't you be his mistress? Could it have anything to do with all that fat hanging on you?”

The servant woman slapped Cheryn's face. “I'm a Talented, too, little girl. And now that the king has once checked your powers, the pathway is open for any Talented to do it. So if you want yourself made helpless, I can oblige. Then I can give you more than an open hand on the face. I know how to hit to keep you from bruising. The king would never have to know—since he wouldn't believe you.”

Jake pushed the grate quietly aside and entered the room.

Cheryn saw him at once, struggled to restrain a smile that would give him away. Instead, she turned her attention back to the fat woman and concentrated on her. “I don't mind being punished if I'm telling the truth. You're a gross, flabby, moose of a woman, and you know it!”

The woman slapped her again. And again.

“Fat!” Cheryn screeched.

Slap!

Jake knew the folly of trying to manhandle this woman, for she was a Talented and beyond his puny Commoner powers. But he could throw her off balance just long enough to give Cheryn a chance to over-power her and knock her out. He sneaked up behind her, carefully reached out and dug his fingers into her sides, tickling her fiercely.

The woman danced wildly, flailing at the surprise and the mirthful sensation. In the few seconds she was off guard, Cheryn grabbed a bottle of sweet-smelling toilet water from the vanity, swung it, broke it over her head. Perfume showered over Jake. The woman staggered, half turned, and fell full length on the floor. Her psionic powers wouldn't do her any good until she regained consciousness, which would be enough time for them to escape.

“Where did you come from?” Cheryn asked.

“I'll show you,” Jake said, grabbing her hand. “We haven't much time. She'll be out only a few minutes.”

He led her to the fireplace, around the concealing partition, and into the stairwell behind the wall. “There's an opening into the throne room,” he said, taking her down the steps to the landing and halfway up the next set. He hunkered down and peered around the wall into the fireplace and beyond. The throne

room was empty. "Come on."

They moved through the fireplace into the room and up to the wall where the portal shimmered eerily.

"Which is the wall that faces Kaliglia?" she asked.

He turned, grimaced. Finally: "That one."

She turned to it, squinted, gritted her teeth. A few seconds went by when nothing seemed to happen. Then, abruptly, there was a huge hole in the wall. The stones had disappeared just as the attacking man-bats had that time at the gorge. Across the field, Kaliglia lumbered out of the forest. He ran awkwardly, but fast.

Abruptly, shouted alarms echoed through the building. The sound of running feet echoed in the big hall.

"They couldn't have heard me," Cheryn said.

"The woman upstairs has gotten up," he said. "A little sooner than we planned."

A manbat scuttled into the room, saw them, turned to run back out.

Cheryn burned him out of existence.

Kaliglia reached the moat, crashed into the water, splashing bucketsful into the throne room. He reached the wall and struggled to raise himself and pull through. For a moment, it seemed as if he would not make it. One of the alligator beasts snapped at his rear quarters, was discouraged when its teeth didn't damage the thick hide of the dragon. Then, kicking, he was through into the throne room. They hurried across the vast floor to the wall where the portal waited.

Half a dozen more manbats and three human guards came into the room.

"Quick!" Jake shouted, grabbing Cheryn by the hand. He leaped into the wall with her. Kaliglia followed, bleating madly . . .

Chapter Fifteen: HOMECOMING

The Smoke Ghosts did not appear—immediately. There was only darkness, a swirling of various hues of black and gray that served to keep them in ignorance of their whereabouts, illuminated nothing, gave view to no concrete objects. They were in a land of nothingness, of shapelessness, of vast expanses of hollowness. The only thing that proved a link to reality was the fresh, cool air and the stiff wind that sucked them across the gloom like the intake of a vacuum cleaner until the light in the castle wall was only as large as a dime suspended at arm's length in the blackness. Then it became only a pinprick, then was gone completely. They floated in a chain, Jake in the lead, Cheryn in the middle, holding onto his hand, and the looming hulk of Kaliglia close behind like some oddly structured battleship. Evidently, when an object from one of the worldlines was dropped into the gulf between realities, the force from the opposite gate pulled that object across the gulf and into the second worldline. In any event, there was an irresistible force drawing them towards another speck of light that was still a pinprick thousands of miles ahead. When Jake had originally crossed, through the aid of the PBT, he had evidently short-circuited the route, come around the gulf or crossed it in one leap. He was thinking how much more pleasant that method had been when the Smoke Ghosts came . . .

The Smoke Ghosts were, it seemed, members of the life form that inhabited this bleak landscape between concrete realities. They were of the same substance as the gloom, though lighter in color—a dusty, gray-white ash. They were shapeless, though they tried to assume the human form when they touched Jake or Cheryn and the dragon form when they were toying with Kaliglia. They formed fingers and paws and touched the three travellers as if examining experimental animals to see the effects of a new drug. Jake watched as the mist beasts penetrated his skin with their insubstantial fingers, shivered as he felt them exploring his insides, touching his organs, gently examining the things that made him tick. Cheryn's hand trembled in his as she felt the beasts doing the same to her. He held her hand more tightly, partly to re-assure her and partly to reassure himself. He was glad he had someone to hold onto, someone to share the horror with. At least sound traveled in the gloom, and he could whisper to her and help steady her nerves. They discovered that sound traveled when Kaliglia bellowed at the first sight of the Smoke Ghosts. It had been a booming, wild, uncontrolled shriek that split the blackness in half.

The light ahead was growing . . .

Growing . . .

As large as a dime . . .

A quarter . . .

A fist . . .

Suddenly they were streaking out of the darkness and tumbling through into brilliant daylight, rolling over and over down a small hill in soft, lush, green grass. Colors had never had so much meaning before, never been so vibrant and exciting. The light hurt their eyes so that they had to squint, but when they gained full sight, they could see they were in a small park and that it was summer. Birds crossed the sky in perfect formation; bees hummed about, stopping at nearby blossoms and delving into the sweet liquors of the flowers. Beyond the tall, heavily leafed trees, the tops of city buildings could be seen, gray and massive, the sun glinting off hundreds of windows. And the children . . .

Children came running from the swings and play-ground equipment, children of all sizes and shapes, colors and creeds, but all having the one common denominator of wonder: wonder at the dragon that had appeared out of thin air. They bounded up the slope to the middle of the hill where the trio had come to a stop, and they circled them in a half moon. Some of the children were afraid of Kaliglia, others were not,

but none of them was going to miss his chance to see a real live dragon at close range.

“Is he tame?” a brown-haired boy of about eight asked Jake.

“Is who tame?”

“The dinosaur.”

Jake grinned suddenly and looked at Kaliglia. Some-how, he had forgotten what a sensation the beast would be in this worldline. “Yeah, son. Yeah, he's tame enough.”

“Could I ride him?” the boy asked.

Kaliglia chuckled.

“Can he?” Jake asked.

“Sure,” Kaliglia said.

The children were speechless.

Jake lifted the eight year old while Kaliglia settled to his knees and sat him on the base of the dragon's neck. “Hold on to the scales,” he said, “but be careful you don't get your fingers pinched in them.”

Kaliglia lumbered away up the hill, turned at the top, and lumbered back down. By that time, the other children were shouting and pushing, all anxious to be next. Jake had to sort them out and line them up. He threatened, if they weren't orderly, that he would not allow them to ride the dinosaur. They quieted down at once and became perfect ladies and gentlemen.

Their mothers were not quite as mannerly. Just then some of the mothers who were in the park with their younger children started running from the equip-ment, screaming and waving their arms. “What's this?” Kaliglia asked,

“I think they're afraid for their little darlings. They don't trust dragons around here.”

“They're going to take the kids away?” Kaliglia asked. “Before they even get to ride?”

“Looks that way.”

Kaliglia grumbled, then raised his head. He opened the great, cavernous mouth and bellowed at the top of his stentorian voice, straight at the running mothers. The blast shook the ground and whined out like a rusty fire siren and the noise from an avalanche mixed together. In the space of three feet, every one of the advancing mothers turned and ran wildly back toward the equipment, to the gate, and out of the park.

Jake laughed.

So did the children.

And Kaliglia.

They started the ride again, taking three children at once. There was the air of a carnival about the whole thing, and Jake realized Kaliglia would have made a prize catch for any circus. He would have to safeguard against that. Now, though, he relaxed and enjoyed the warm air, the bright sky, and the laughter of the children. Until the police came . . .

They drove right through the gates of the park in the two cars, sirens going, red dome lights flashing. They roared up the graveled lane through the play-ground area and turned into the field where Kaliglia was giving rides. Both cars braked at the same mo-ment, spewing dirt and stones and grass into the air over each other. The doors burst open, and the city police got out.

“What are those things?” Cheryn asked, amazed.

“Police.”

“No, no. The things they were in.”

“Automobiles. Machines. You've lost track of them in your worldline. They're about as common as drag-ons are in your own world.”

“I must see how one works,” she said.

“You'll get your chance.”

The police rushed up the hill, guns drawn, and stopped behind Jake and Cheryn. They stood, watch-ing the great beast carry the children up the hill—un-able to speak. Finally, one of them, a burly man with shoulders as wide and straight as a heavy plank, said, “Hey you!”

Jake turned to him. “Me?”

“Yeah. What's going on here?”

“We're giving the children rides on our dragon,” Jake said, savoring the slapstick situation for all it was worth.

“Dragon,” the cop said. It wasn't a question and hardly a statement. It came out between his lips some-what like a sigh, somewhat like a gasp.

“Dragon,” Jake repeated, grinning.

“Well, what's a dragon doing here?”

“Giving the children rides.”

Suddenly the burly policeman grabbed Jake by the shirt and twisted him around, lifting him nearly off the ground. “I don't have to take smart talk from hippies!” the cop snapped. “Now you come across with some answers quick!” Jake coughed, sucked in breath. The cop shook him harshly until his hair flew all about his head and his walnut shell necklace clattered wildly. “Quick, I said!”

Abruptly, the cop's fingers let go of Jake's shirt and turned on the cop's own uniform. They laced themselves in his shirt and rugged. In another second, he was hanging in the air as if he had lifted himself with his own hands. His hands shook him. One of them left go of his shirt and slapped his face.

“Hey! Hey!” the cop shouted.

The other policemen had drawn their guns.

Cheryn dropped the lead officer, turned on the others. In a moment, they were all hanging in the air, all held by their own hands. Then, in perfect unison, each officer began to slap his own face, helpless against Cheryn's psi powers. She gave each one a good shaking up, then dropped them as she had the first. All four turned and ran, leaped into the cars. The cars started, turned with a squeal of wheels, and roared out of the park, some of the doors still hanging open. When they hit the street, their sirens were going.

“No more of that,” Jake said.

“What?” she asked innocently.

“No more Talent. You'll have to conceal it here. If you use it, they'll make a lab specimen out of you.”

“But they—”

“No buts, wife.”

“I'm not your wife, yet.”

“You will be. And I don't want you using your Talent unless I tell you to. Understood?”

She sulked a moment. Then: “Okay. Understood. Yes, chief.”

He grabbed her, slapped her behind, hugged her to him. They stood watching the children and the dragon. Kaliglia was having a tremendous time, per-haps better than the kids. He frolicked up and down the hill. Had he been able, he would have stood on his head to please them. For a time, everything was beautiful again. Until the second round of sirens broke the spell . . .

Chapter Sixteen: FUZZ

? Just before the patrol cars arrived, the police traffic copter fluttered overhead like some huge primeval dragonfly. There was a man leaning over the one doorsill with a rifle. Jake realized, suddenly, what the cop was trying to take a shot at: Kaliglia. But there were children on the dragon's back, and the man in the copter couldn't take a chance for fear he would hit the kids or—once he shot the dragon—it would roll over on them in its death throes. He stopped sighting and held onto the rifle with one hand, waiting for the kids to get off. Then, roaring through the gates of the park, the police returned in force, six cars of them with four men to a car. They opened the doors and dropped behind them, using them for shields. Some left the cars and spread out in a great semicircle, closing in like commando troops from all angles, riot helmets gleaming bright crimson in the sunlight.

“What's this?” Cheryn asked. “What's happening?”

“My people have a flair for dramatics,” Jake said, but he wasn't feeling as jovial as he sounded. He should have grasped the situation earlier, and he berated himself for his foolishness. A real, live dragon would cause quite a stir in a Twentieth-Century city. He had seen all the movies, hadn't he? He had shivered in dark theaters, sopping up the campy American International films, the way out slapstick Japanese things. *Gorgo*, *Godzilla*, the whole line of oversized lizards mauling office buildings and devastating the Works of Man. And the police had seen them, too. It was the only concept they had of a dragon now. A dragon, they were sure, had to be a ferocious, mind-less, vicious monster bent on destruction, a horror that had to be stopped at all costs. And they were preparing the defense. They might even kill Kaliglia!

The helicopter drifted across the top of the hill, swept over Kaliglia. The huge beast looked at it friendly enough and bleated a jarring hello. The copter pilot panicked at the rear and pulled straight up, almost stalling the machine. It choked, sputtered, caught, and fluttered down the slope to hover over the patrol cars.

Kaliglia kneeled to discharge his passengers and pick up a new load.

“Don't let those kids get off!” Jake shouted.

Kaliglia stood up again.

The commandos were slithering up through the grass like snakes.

“Why not?” the dragon asked. “They've had their turn.”

The commandos stopped dead.

One of the line shrieked and ran back toward the cars.

“Hold the line!” an officer shouted, but the commandos finally broke under the knowledge that the dragon could talk as well as any man, and every one of them ran pell-mell back to the cars and cowered behind the doors, peering through the windows and around the edges, but not daring to step out in full sight.

“Never mind why not,” Jake said. “Just keep them on your back.”

The kids already on the beast yelled with glee and slapped the scaly hide of their dragon.

“There are only three more who haven't ridden,” Kaliglia said. “Suppose I pick them up, too?”

“Okay. Yeah. The more, the merrier.”

Kaliglia bent and waited while the last three climbed up his side and lodged themselves on his hump, each clutching the child before him. Standing, Kaliglia stomped up the hill, bellowed when he got to the top and galloped around to give the kids a thrill.

“You there!” the officer who had been leading the commandos hollered.

"Me?" Jake asked, looking down the slope to the patrol cars.

"Yeah. You. Come here."

Jake winked at Cheryn and sauntered down to the cars. "Something I can do for you officers?"

"You know anything about that dinosaur?"

"He's mine."

"Yours?"

"That's correct."

"He's tame?"

"Perfectly."

The cop stood up from behind the door and scratched his riot helmet before he realized he was wearing it. He still held his pistol with the safety off, but some of the tenseness was gone from his face.

"Where the hell did you ever pick him up?"

"It's a long story."

"We have complaints from the mothers . . ."

"The children haven't been hurt."

"I'm afraid," the cop said, "that I'm going to have to take you in."

"Kaliglia too?"

"Who's that?"

"The dragon."

"Yeah. Him most of all."

It might be fun, Jake decided, to play along with all this for awhile. He did not look at authority with quite as much loathing as did his New Left friends on campus. He had some respect, but mostly he was possessed with a humorous tolerance of them. It appealed to this sense of humor to lead them on for awhile, at least until he could get in touch with Wilson Abrams, the man whom he had put in charge of Turnet Muni-tions, and get the entire thing straightened out.

"No harm will come to him?" Jake asked.

"None. Not if he's tame like you say."

"Your men look awfully jumpy. I'm afraid their guns just might go off accidentally."

"I'll order them not to shoot," the officer said, puffing out his chest and squaring his jaw to show who was in command of this operation in the first place.

"Okay," Jake said, "but I think we'll have a little insurance first."

"Insurance?"

"I want three of your men to ride Kaliglia back to police headquarters."

"Wha—"

"Otherwise we don't go. If there are three of your men on him, that will dissuade anyone from shooting him. He could roll over and crush them if anyone got trigger happy."

The officer swallowed hard. He turned to the men who had been listening attentively, their weapons still drawn. "Holster your guns!" he shouted. They did so reluctantly. "Jackson, Barringer, Cleaver, front!" Three officers, all young, rushed up and saluted. "You'll ride the dinosaur back to headquarters," the officer said.

"But—" one of the rookies started to protest.

"Or I'll have your badges and your skins!" the officer roared. "Now move your asses!"

They followed Jake, apprehensively, back up the hill to where Kaliglia stood with the six children on his back. "You can let them down," Jake said to the dragon.

Kaliglia nodded and kneeled. The children climbed off, disappointed that the ride wasn't going to last even longer than it had. The police formed a line and, hesitantly, clambered up the flank of the beast and straddled his neck and horned ridge. They clasped each other like the children had and looked as if they would be sick any moment.

"You follow the police cars," Jake said. "We'll be in one of them."

"Is this all right?" Kaliglia asked.

The police blanched, and one nearly fell off.

“It's fine. They're just taking us in because they don't know what else to do with us. When we get there, I'll call Wilson Abrams and he'll straighten everything out for us.”

“Let's go, then,” Kaliglia said.

“Oh, God,” one of the policemen said. “Oh, God, oh God, oh God.” They all took it up then, moaning low in their throats, their faces white, holding on to each other so tightly that they must have been break-ing ribs.

“What a bunch of fraidy cats,” Kaliglia snorted.

Jake and Cheryn got in the second police car, and Kaliglia, carrying the three officers, waddled up behind. The other four cars pulled around to the rear of the dragon. The first car started its siren, and the procession pulled through the playground and out into the streets, leaving the children behind on the hill.

Chapter Seventeen: MORE FUZZ

? At police headquarters, Kaliglia was led through an alleyway where his sides brushed both building walls, and placed in a large parking lot behind the stationhouse with eight cops left to watch over him. The three riding him scrambled down and hurried away to a safe distance.

“We’ll be right inside this building,” Jake said. “It shouldn’t take too long. When I get Abrams, I’ll have him fly right out here—wherever ‘here’ is—and get us out of this mess. If you need us, just bellow.”

“Right,” Kaliglia said. He wasn’t afraid of the guns. He didn’t really know what they were for.

Jake and Cheryn were led into the station to the front desk where a white-haired officer was pacing back and forth, occasionally looking out the window at the bulk of Kaliglia standing at the far end of the parking lot. “Are these them?” he almost shouted when Jake and Cheryn came in.

“This is them,” the officer from the park said.

“Book them at once!” the old cop said to the desk sergeant.

“Now wait a minute,” Jake said.

“You—shut up!” the cop snapped.

“You can’t talk to me like that!” Jake snapped back.

“I just did.”

“What’ll I book them on, chief?” the desk sergeant asked.

“Uh—” He looked them over. “Book the girl on a charge of indecency in public. That dress hardly covers anything.”

“God damn it, now—” Jake began.

“And book him on swearing in public. Is there a law about swearing in public?”

“Somewhere. Real old,” the desk sergeant said. “We used it when we wanted to hold that robbery suspect a few months ago. Remember?”

“Use it again,” the chief said.

“I demand to make a phone call,” Jake demanded.

“In time, in time,” the chief said.

“I don’t see why you had to book us, either.”

“To hold you until they can get here.”

“They?”

“This is far out of our league, sonny. Far out. The FBI is on the way.”

Jake groaned.

Cheryn had been taken to a different room to await the coming of the Federal men, and Jake could imagine how boiling mad she was, ready to blow, surely. He had thought she was going to use her magics on the police matron when the fat woman had propelled her through a door into a detention room. But she was obeying his orders to keep her Talent under wraps. It was a good thing, too. If anyone ever found out what she could do, any future privacy they might hope to have would be a dream of ashes. The cops that re-ported being lifted into the air and having their faces slapped by their own hands would not be believed. It would be assumed that the confusion and the excitement at having found a real dragon had gotten them so mixed up that they couldn’t be counted on for rational reports. But if Cheryn demonstrated the power once more, then someone would connect the incidents and the game would be lost. So far she was behaving herself. He just hoped the matron didn’t use any other rough measures with

the girl.

As he sat in the bare room, much like a cell, he began to be more and more afraid. They had called Abrams, and the lawyer was on his way, though doubtlessly confused about the talk of intelligent dragons that filled the conversation. Turnet Munitions could put its entire resources into the case if Jake felt like making it do so. They would certainly get off without much trouble. It was the dragon that he was worried for. What would the FBI make of that?

He was about to find out.

The door opened, admitted a short, muscular, well-dressed man in his mid-forties, closed behind him. He stood, looking at Jake a moment, shaking his head at the sight of the long hair and beard. Finally, he came across the room. "My name is Conners. I'm from—"

"The FBI," Jake finished, refusing to shake the proffered hand.

"How—"

"The old man outside, the one that plays around the edges of the law, let it slip."

"No matter," Conners said, pulling up the only other chair in the room. He swung it around and sat down backwards on it, crossing his arms on the back. He tilted his hat back on his head to give himself a jaunty-look that, somehow, didn't go with the rest of his features. "Suppose you tell me what this is all about."

"Suppose you tell me," Jake said, "why we're being treated as criminals. I don't have to talk until my lawyer arrives."

"Very knowledgeable about the law, aren't we," Conners said nastily. He pushed open his coat to expose his gun. It was intended to send shivers down Jake's spine. It did, too.

"I don't want trouble," Jake said.

"Fine, fine," Conners said, smiling. A crocodile smile. "We hoped you'd be a little more cooperative. I'm glad to see you're coming around. It's the smart thing. Really, it is."

"What do you want?"

Conners took his hat off and twirled it on one finger, ran the tip of his tongue over his teeth. "Just the story. Where'd the damn dragon come from? Was there anything in this report about policemen being levitated, anything else that might tie in?"

Jake shivered inwardly. Maybe, if they accepted a dragon in the Twentieth Century, they would accept stories of levitation, too. He would have to lie around that, play for time until Abrams arrived. He could tell the basic story about the worldlines, which this man might or might not believe. It would take up time, anyway. "It started with PBT," he said, and spent the next thirty minutes summing up his adventures in the other worldline where King Lelar was even that min-ute planning domination of his own parallel world, planning to cross the gorge and annihilate the Sorceress Kell and those opposed to him.

When he stopped, the FBI man was pacing the room, looking out into the parking lot now and then at the looming mass of the dragon where it shuffled around before the guns of the nervous police. "It's ridiculous!"

"Give me another explanation for Kaliglia."

Conners opened his mouth, closed it without saying anything. He paced some more, his hands locked behind his back, his feet clicking in a military manner against the cold tile floor. "No, it must be like you said. As crazy as it sounds, it must be something like that. Though I think you're holding out on me."

He was, of course. He had not mentioned anything about Cheryn's powers, had not told Conners that she was a Talented. "Well, that's it. Believe it or not," Jake said. "When my lawyer comes—"

"You won't be here," Conners said abruptly.

"What?"

"This is too important. Turnet, don't you see what this could mean? Do you see where this would put us if we could just reach into this other worldline and get a few of these Talented to cooperate with us against the Russians?"

Jake saw. "But they wouldn't cooperate."

"This Lelar sounds like he might."

"He'd take you over after he had used you," Jake said.

"I doubt that," Connors said. "They may have ESP, but you said they live in a primitive world. No cars, television. I doubt he could take us over."

"You idiot," Jake said, pounding his fist into his palm.

"Come on," Connors said.

"Where?"

"You'll find out. Come on."

"What's to be done with the girl? The dragon?"

"The girl comes with us," Connors said. "The dragon? Well, there's more like him where he came from. I guess we can feed him some narcotics, truss him up, and hand him over to some biology nuts. Seems to me a lot of universities would like to get their hands on him."

"I won't go," Jake said.

Connors drew his pistol. "We only need one of you. You or the girl. In fact, maybe we could do without both of you. I know how much PBT you had taken. You told me. I could recreate the scene now and go into this other worldline. So if you don't cooperate—"

Jake cursed himself. "I'll cooperate," he said.

"Let's go."

Connors pushed open the door, still holding his gun, and they went into the main duty room of the station-house. All Jake wanted now was to see Cheryn, to say one word to her, one important word. They stood waiting until the matron brought Cheryn out. She was flushed and angry—probably from a search by the matron and from the questioning of the second FBI man that was with her.

"Let's go," Connors said. "We have a car outside."

One word.

Cheryn looked at Jake beseechingly.

"Magics!" Jake shouted. "Quick!"

Connors whirled with his gun.

The second FBI agent drew his own pistol.

And both guns dissolved in their hands,

"Let's get to Kaliglia," Jake said, grabbing Cheryn's arm.

The stationhouse erupted in pandemonium. Connors grabbed for the girl, but his fingers struck something solid half a foot from her, and he could not get through it. The same thing happened when he reached for Jake. The desk sergeant was shouting. An alarm bell was ringing. A young officer, one of those who had ridden Kaliglia to the parking lot, ran for the weapons rack. But before he got there, every gun had turned to ashes.

"Quickly," Jake said, taking her hand. The invincible invisible shields did not obstruct him like they obstructed everyone else.

They ran out the door into the early evening coolness. Darkness was slowly creeping across the city, and the far edge of the sky was a dull orange from the sunset. Jake wished the people of his worldline were half as charming as their surroundings. They took the steps two at a time and ran around the building, down the alleyway toward the parking lot and the dragon.

"Halt!" an officer yelled from the end of the alleyway, his gun leveled at their stomachs.

Then his gun was gone, and he was grasping thin air.

They ran by him.

Kaliglia bleated happily when he saw them.

"Stop right there!" another cop shouted. "Men!" he ordered. The officers guarding Kaliglia turned and leveled their guns at the two approaching hippies. Then their guns, too, were gone, nothing but the faint trace of ash smears on their hands. Their commanding officer reacted more quickly than the rest and ordered them to grab Jake and Cheryn. They tried, smashing their hands uselessly against the shields.

Then they were next to Kaliglia, and Cheryn extended the shield to cover all of them. Beyond, the lot was full of police. Sirens were moaning, bells ringing, men shouting excitedly.

"Some home you have here," she said.

He didn't answer. He had thought that her world-line was intolerable, a place where Talented ruled

supreme and where Commoners cowered before the likes of Lelar, where the laws of nature could be disrupted at the whim of a sadistic esper. But her worldline, in reality, had something that his worldline lacked: wonder. It had a sense of wonder, a sense of fairy beauty that he had been too stupid to appreciate when he had been there. Here, in the 'real' world of Twentieth-Century Earth Before Nuclear War, there were not many dreamers, not many who could appreciate magic and witches, wizards and warlocks and talking dragons. A talking dragon was something to be locked up in a zoo—maybe eventually dissected to satisfy the curiosity of bearded professors, to quench their thirst for facts, facts, facts. An esper was a potential weapon, not a potential healer, not a potential boon to mankind. A pathway into another worldline was a road to better means of destruction, a tool toward world domination. No, Cheryn's world was a better one, no doubt about it. It was a place of adventure for the sake of adventure, a place where a man's wits counted for a great deal, a place where magic was never taken for granted. And, discounting Lelar, a place where Talented used their psionic abilities for good, not evil. He wanted, more than anything, to go back.

"Some home I have here," he said, nodding sadly.

"Then do we go back to my worldline?" she asked.

"How? I can't walk out and ask for enough PBT to get us back. And we can't make it to the park and find the hole that we dropped out of."

"We don't need any of that. I can take us back."

"You what?"

"Can take us back. Something has happened to my Talent. It's larger than ever before. Before, I couldn't have created a shield big enough to shelter all of us. Now I'm doing it without strain. I think I could make a shield to cover the whole city and still have enough power to play games with your police."

"It must have something to do with passing between worldlines," he said.

"When that 'wind' was tugging on us," she said. "When we were coming through the gloom. I think it was that wind, though it might have even been the Smoke Ghosts. I felt them fiddling around inside of me."

"And you can open a portal for us? Now?"

"I think so."

"Do it, then!"

And she did. The spot before them turned dark, darker, pitch black. It grew until it was an enormous square directly before them. Slowly, the blackness retreated, and the square was filled with a scene of the Castle Lelar standing before them, manbats drifting about its towers. "Let's go," she said.

They moved through it, dropped less than a foot, and were standing in Lelar once again. The portal closed behind them.

"We must hide quickly before the manbats see us," Jake said, grabbing her arm.

"I don't think so."

"What do you mean?"

"I think we're going to walk into the castle and take over."

"What are you talking about?"

"I think, with my new powers, I can handle the king quite easily."

"You're crazy."

"We'll find out," she said. "Come on."

They moved forward.

The manbats saw them, sounded the alarm.

A dense cloud of the demons sprung into the air from the battlements and swept toward them, wings flapping, dark eyes gleaming, claws sprung and ready to slash . . .

Chapter Eighteen: PSIONIC BATTLE

? “So many of them,” Kaliglia moaned.

The manbats fluttered down toward them. The first of the flock touched ground and scuttled forward, snarling, slobbering, their wicked fangs greenish-yellow and very, very sharp. There were easily eighty of them, and Jake felt certain they would sweep across and kill all three of them before Cheryn could burn them. But she did not plan, after all, to burn them anyway. When the bats were only twenty feet away, they stopped abruptly and dropped their arms to their sides. Their wings folded behind them, and some of the luster went from their eyes. They waited until Cheryn, Jake, and Kaliglia had passed, then fell into line behind them.

“What goes?” Jake asked.

“They know who is more powerful,” she said. “They are on our side now.”

“I don't know if I like having that sort on my side,” he said.

“Better than against us.”

“True. True enough.”

The manbats scuttled behind, an impressive rear guard.

They walked across the drawbridge, and the two guards there stood back to let them pass, their swords limp at their sides. They moved into the great hall-way and were confronted by a Talented, a black-robed man, squat and ugly with warts all over the left side of his face. “So,” he said, rubbing his hands together and advancing carelessly, “my winged friends bring me prisoners.”

“Look again,” Cheryn advised. “They aren't bring-ing us. We're bringing them.”

The Talented was suddenly surprised. He took sev-eral steps backward, then turned on Cheryn. He threw spears at her, creating them out of thin air. She turned them back on him so suddenly that the Thobs punc-tured him in a dozen places. He fell backwards with a clatter, bleeding all over the beautiful floor.

They moved on.

Somehow, the alarm had been sounded. At the next bend in the corridor, two more Talented were waiting. The first created a shield of protection about them, while the second created bolts of fire which he shot at Cheryn and her entourage. The bolts of fire bounced off their targets and ricocheted about the room, sputtering and dying, catching the long, velvet curtains on fire.

The Talented hurled boulders now, boulders with steel spikes thrusting out of them as thickly as quills on the back of an enraged porcupine. The spined boulders were flung back at them, disappeared as the Talented released his hold on them.

Cheryn reached out and set their shield on fire, turned it into burning stone.

The two Talented screamed, tried to get out of their blazing prison. The flaming rock collapsed inward upon them, disappeared, taking their bodies with it.

They walked on.

As they entered the main throne room where the portal between worldlines existed, they were met by King Lelar. He stood on the throne platform, dressed in brilliant white robes, an orange crescent on his right shoulder, an orange crescent on the center of the cape that flowed behind him like wings.

“Far enough!” he roared.

“*Not* far enough,” Cheryn said.

“You're back,” Lelar said. “I would know where you went through the Portal and how you returned without using it.”

“You will never find out,” Cheryn said.

“Ah, still as fiery as ever,” the king said, smiling lopsidedly.

“More than ever,” she replied.

They kept advancing.

“Far enough!” Lelar roared, creating a set of steel bars from floor to ceiling of the room, another set immediately behind them, enclosing them. He grinned. “Quite foolish of you to return, really. You were fortunate to have escaped. I will have no mercy this time, my dear. I feel you would not be that good a lover anyway. Perhaps you are *too* fiery.”

Cheryn smiled. At the foot of the bars, small rodents appeared. They began to nibble at the steel. Soon, they were gobbling it at a fantastic rate, crawling toward the ceiling, using the bars they were eating for purchase while they worked. In seconds, the bars were gone—as were the bloated rodents.

“Very good,” Lelar said. But he wasn't smiling now.

Abruptly there were ropes around both of them, and Kaliglia—who had just barely squeezed down the hallways and into the throne room through the huge double doors—was bound and on his back like a pig to be spitted.

The ropes turned to snakes and slithered off their charges, freeing them, slid across the floor and bit Lelar's legs.

The king screamed and backed toward the throne.

Mouths opened in the floor and swallowed the snakes.

Cheryn threw a ball of blue fire at Lelar.

He caught it in a bowl of yellow energy and slung it back.

It dissipated before it reached them.

Lelar sent a thousand red bees at them with stingers an inch long.

Cheryn raised her hands, grinning.

The bees turned to flowers and fell to the floor.

Lelar pointed at the brilliant blossoms.

They decayed and formed a mound of rot. The rot began to jell into a half-formed, hideous graveyard beast. It pushed to its rotten feet and trudged toward them, groaning, its mouth open, a black hole in its mangled head.

Cheryn turned it into a pretty young girl in a low-cut dress.

The girl curtsied and disappeared.

Lelar squinted and exercised full powers.

The room seemed to disappear and was replaced with a swirling, boiling sea of colors. There were streams of blue, pools of ocher, geysers of yellow and peach, splashes of green, fountains of crimson and cinnabar. Color burst and bloomed about them, blinding them. Slowly, Lelar swam at them through the gurgling, bubbling hues. He sat in yoga position, levitated, floating nearer and nearer.

Jake reached out for something.

There was nothing to grab.

His hands closed on crimson . . .

The crimson flowed through his fingers . . .

He flailed . . .

He hugged his arms around amber . . .

The amber turned to bubbles . . .

Burst . . .

Was gone . . .

He was lying in a pool of onyx . . .

There was a brown and purple sky overhead . . .

Lelar was descending through it . . .

White and orange lightnings played around the king's head . . .

Kaliglia bleated . . .

Lelar drew closer . . .

He was grinning . . .
Cinnabar fields beneath a waving, rippling black and blue sky . . .
Dancing rouge . . .
Leaping violet . . .
Cheryn in a burst of blue . . .
Red robes fluttering . . .
Lelar laughing . . .
Cheryn hurling yellow balls . . .
Lelar dodging . . .
Noise building . . .
Building . . .
Louder . . .
Booming thunder and tinkling bells . . .
Red waves crashing on a green shore . . .
Trumpets blaring . . .
Cymbals clashing . . .
Crashing . . .
Building toward a crescendo . . .
It came to Jake that they just might lose the battle.
Just might lose . . .
Just might . . .
Boom! A burst of black tinted yellow at the edges . . .
An explosion of blue with a white core . . .
Trombones . . .
Trumpets . . .
Drums . . .
Strange horns . . .
Screaming toward a climax . . .
Explosion!
And darkness.

Chapter Nineteen: THE KINGDOM OF JAKE

? When he came to, Cheryn was slumped at his side, unconscious. He lay, waiting for the scythe of Lelar's power to cut them both in half. But no blow came. After a few minutes, he stirred himself, sat up. Lelar was nowhere in sight. The throne room looked perfectly normal. At the rear, the manbats lay in heaps, also knocked out from the blinding explosion of energy that had been set when Cheryn and Lelar locked minds. He turned Cheryn over and looked at her. She was smiling. He slapped her face carefully, and she moved, groaned, opened her eyes.

"Lelar—" he said.

"I destroyed him," she answered. "It was rather close, though."

He burst out laughing as the tension drained from him. He pulled her close and hugged her. "It's now the Kingdom of Cheryn," he said excitedly.

"No," she said.

Behind, Kaliglia moaned and woke up, grumbled something.

"What do you mean?"

"It's the Kingdom of Jake," she said, smiling.

"Wait a minute—"

"You will draw the Talented together for a good purpose now," she said. "You can teach them things of your world. Maybe we can sneak back to your world—without dragons this time—and gather information to restore the sciences on this world. We'll take only the good from your line. We'll elevate the Commoners."

"You could do all that yourself if—"

"It needs a man," she said. "And you're very much a man. You be the king, Jake. Please. I'll be the queen. We need you as king because you know how your people fight. And now that they know how to cross the worldlines, they'll be taking your PBT and coming through by the dozens. We'll need good plans to fight them off."

"She's right," Kaliglia affirmed. "Listen to her."

A kingdom of his own. Yes, there certainly was more magic in this worldline. And it was true: they would need his help to ward off the attacks from the other worldline. At all costs, they had to keep the unmagical world from tainting this place of witches and dragons. "Okay," he said. "It's a deal."

"Good."

"And now, for my first act as king."

"What's that?" she asked.

He grinned, took her hand. "I now pronounce us man and wife."

And he kissed her.

Kaliglia groaned, giggled, chuckled, and finally laughed out loud